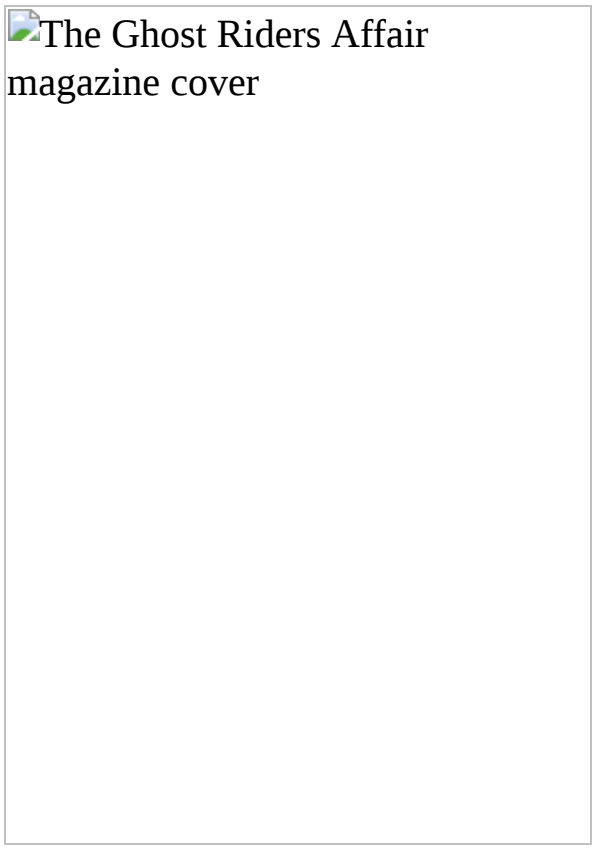
The Ghost Riders Affair magazine cover

The Ghost Riders Affair

By Harry Whittington

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Two men alone must divert THRUSH's ruthless plan at using the Prehistoric past to master mankind. Can they do it?

Baffled, U.N.C.L.E. faces the deadly riddle of the sleek luxury liner which sped off into the dark on schedule—and vanished from the face of the earth! Follow Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin in this, their most danger-packed adventure of all. It's a story you'll never forget.

Deep inside the Earth a blind, gasping madman had marshaled a monstrous army of Evil, as Solo and Illya race against time and cruel odds to face THRUSH's most incredible death plot of all.

Act I: Incident of the Stolen Train
Act II: Incident of the Missing Castle
Act III: Incident of the Prehistoric Rivers
Act IV: Incident of the Incredible Earthquake

ACT I: INCIDENT OF THE STOLEN TRAIN

Protected by every safety device know, the Central Chieftain flashed through the night, racing against time between Pittsburgh and Chicago.

"Care to sign these letters now, Mr. Howell? They're urgent."

Harrison Howell glanced up from the plush luxury of his custom-built sleeping car. Accompanied by two male secretaries, a French chef, and a guard supplied by Protection, Inc., Howell waved the secretary aside. "I'll get to them before we reach Chicago."

Stout, in his fifties, accustomed to being obeyed unquestionably, Howell smiled. "Got involved in this geology book written by Dr. Leonard Finnish before he disappeared. A man I'd liked to have known, since geology was my first interest—"

"But your letters, sir—"

"Later."

At this instant all train lights flared out, throwing the entire streamliner into total darkness.

In the Chicago dispatch office bored operators checked the progress of the Chieftain on the brightly illumined computer, a complex of multi-colored lights, each bulb a vital message in itself.

An operator shouted, "The computer's flipped! Get a technician in here!"

Other operators crowded around the suddenly dark, silent computer.

The awed operator stammered, "Lights out on the Pittsburgh-Chicago run. Three hundred miles southeast of Chicago. The computer clicked off as if the trip was completed."

"Try to contact the Chieftain by phone."

And it wasn't too many hours later when the nation's afternoon newspapers carried the incredible story: The impossible had happened. A streamliner disappeared off its tracks, vanishing from the face of the earth, with all passengers and crew.

TWO

Hundreds of miles west, in the Sawtooth Mountain ranges of Wyoming, a rail-thin cowpuncher in battered Stetson, dusty levis and boots rode dazedly downslope toward the ranch yard of the Maynard Cattle company.

At the ranch house people spilled into the yard. They'd spent two days searching for him. They shouted at him as he approached.

He sat straight in his saddle, but when he came near they saw he was dazed. He almost fell. Three men grabbed him

"Take him inside," Carlos Maynard said. A heavy-set man in his forties, his florid face was troubled. "Get a doctor."

Ranch hands carried the rider into the house and laid him down on a bed.

Four hours later, a doctor from Cripple Bend settlement shook his head over the rider. "Can't find anything physically wrong with Pete. Looks like exhaustion and exposure."

Carlos Maynard stared at the doctor. "That all you can tell me?"

"What else do you want me to say?"

Maynard scowled. "This is the second man I've sent out looking for my cattle. They come back like this—dazed. Out of their heads. Don't know where they've been. You find nothing wrong. Only they can't tell me where they were, or what's happened to more than one thousand head of Santa Gertrudis cattle."

The doctor shook his head. "Let Pete sleep. Maybe when he wakes up he can remember what happened."

Awaking after ten hours of sleep, Pete Wasson found Maynard sitting beside the bed. "What happened up there, Pete?"

Pete stared around the roughly furnished room. "How did I get here?"

"Come on, Pete! Three days ago I sent you looking for Marty Nichelson and my cattle—"

"Three days?" Pete's eyes clouded. "I been gone three days?"

Maynard managed to control his indignation and puzzlement. "Right. My cattle have been missing a week now. Did you find even a trace?"

Pete drew his hand across his eyes. "Nothing, boss. They just vanished like clouds, not leaving a track! I remember I kept thinking it was like that song about the ghost riders—"

"That's enough senseless talk, Pete! I want to know where my cattle are!"

"That's all I can tell you. There was a clear trail just like Marty said, up into the Sawtooth ranges. Then the trail just stopped."

"You loco? A thousand head of cattle have got to leave some kind of trail!"

"These didn't, boss. That's all I know."

"All right. What happened to you?"

Pete Wasson stirred on the bed, face gray, almost afraid to answer. "I must have fallen, boss—"

"Don't you *know?*"

"No sir, I don't. It's all cloudy. Seems to me a rain came up, and I was looking for trail. Got this kind of funny feeling—a headache like, dizzy,

sick at my stomach. I must have fallen, hit my head on a rock. I remember riding down here toward the ranch, and then I woke up in here. That's all I know, Mr. Maynard."

Maynard walked to the door. He stared at the dudes sitting around the huge front room, waiting to hear the verdict on Pete. A pall had shrouded the ranch for more than a week.

Not only was Maynard losing cattle but the tourists were getting edgy, leaving, as though the ranch were haunted. Well, that didn't make sense. But then neither did the loss of a thousand head of cattle!

"Maybe somebody's trying to put you out of business, Mr. Maynard." Marty Nichelson said. The young cowboy sat beside Pete's bed. "I can't tell you any more than Pete has. Not even as much. Like he said, I got this headache, too, but I know how sore you were going to be, losing all those cattle and no trace, so I kept riding. This headache got worse, and I got so sick I headed into Cripple Bend."

"And spent three days on a drunk!" Maynard accused him.

Marty winced and nodded. "I don't know what happened, boss. It was like I was sick—"

"Drunk!"

"But first I was sick. And fouled up. Them cattle just walking off the face of the earth didn't make sense. I decided a couple of drinks might help.

Next thing I knew, you said I'd been gone three days. I wish I could help you, but I can't tell you any more than Pete did."

Maynard growled. "Pete hasn't told me anything! But somebody's going to!"

Newspaper headlines, television cameras and radio newsmen sped the story around the world: 1000 CATTLE MISSING WITHOUT TRACE.

* * *

Illya Kuryakin walked silently down the gleaming length of the long streamliner.

Behind Illya five Central trainmen and special detectives watched him, but Illya ignored them.

He paused at the special car which had been added to the regular Chieftain run, making this an exact replica of the train which had vanished.

The small sender-receiver crackled in his hand. Alexander Waverly's voice spoke as if the United Network Command officer were at Illya's shoulder. "Did you find something, Mr. Kuryakin?"

Illya grinned faintly from beneath corn-yellow hair.

"Why are you smiling?" This was Solo's voice from the small speaker.

"Because I'm on your candid camera," Illya said.

"Yes. And you will be, " Alexander Waverly told him. "We will attempt to keep this train on camera as long as we can."

"Do you pick up the bleep signal?" Illya asked.

"Loud and clear," Solo answered. It was as if they were not in the command office at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters but were nearer than the train detectives. Still, Illya had a sense of being alone that he could not explain and could not escape.

A slender, Slavic blond man, he was no stranger to peril. Congenitally a loner, he liked solitary assignments.

It seemed to onlookers that he was like a machine. At moments like this nothing existed for him except the assigned task. He'd been born in a country where freedom was taxed and strained and sometimes betrayed; he

had learned to despise evil in whatever guise it appeared, to fight it wherever he found it.

Now, Illya felt as if he might be embarking on more than a routine train ride from Pittsburgh to Chicago, his latest assignment from U.N.C.L.E.—the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

"You look a little green around the gills," he heard Napoleon Solo saying, knowing that Solo stood beside Waverly in the command room, watching him on closed-circuit television.

"Poor camera work," Illya said casually.

But inwardly, Illya admitted that Solo was perceptive. The unexplained disappearance of a sleek modern streamliner from its tracks belonged to the ghostly unknown, the kind of fantastic stories Illya Kuryakin had heard from superstitious natives in his early childhood.

His mind was coldly analytical, and he had no patience for fantasy. Yet not even the coldest mind could deny that a train, exactly like this one, had vanished, and with it every soul aboard. And without leaving a trace.

It was as if Alexander Waverly read Illya's thought. The receiver crackled as Waverly spoke: "We may not be able to follow the entire run by televised pictures, Illya, but no matter where your train goes, you'll send back a radio bleep. Don't worry—we'll follow you all the way."

The conductor said, "We're ready to roll now, Mr. Kuryakin, if you are."

Illya waved his arm and nodded. He swung aboard the custom-made sleeper that was a precise duplicate of the car in which billionaire philanthropist Harrison Howell had ridden into nothingness.

The sleek streamliner glided along the tracks. Illya prowled the richly appointed car.

"Do you take well to being a rich man, Illya?" Solo inquired via the speaker.

"I was born a billionaire at heart," Illya answered. "I thought you knew."

There was no reply from the command room in New York. Illya turned up the volume on the sender-receiver. "Something gone wrong, Solo?"

Still there was no answer. Illya shook the receiver. The line between him and the command room was open. He was certain of it. There was the urgent crackle, yet neither Solo nor Waverly spoke.

Illya said, "Solo, answer please. Waverly. This is Mayday. Come in, please."

The speaker crackled in his hand. Holding his breath, Illya waited, but no one spoke.

He pressed the sending button. "Come in. Come in. Can you read the bleep-message?"

As if distantly, Illya heard Solo's voice. But Solo was speaking to Waverly, not to Kuryakin: "Can they locate the source of the interference, sir?"

Then Illya heard Waverly, voice sharply impatient: "Negative."

"We better tell Illya the problem," Solo suggested.

"Yes!" Illya spoke loudly into the sender. "Somebody be kind enough to tell me what's going on."

Alexander Waverly's voice came into the private car clearly: "Slight problem here, Illya, but it should not be a major obstacle. Temporarily at least, we've lost the televised picture. When the train got under way, some interference was set.

"We're getting nothing but a jumbled pattern at the moment. We're working on it. Meantime, I assure you the bleep is coming in strong. We're following every mile of your trip. As soon as we get the picture back, we'll let you know. Meantime, I'm sure I don't have to caution you to remain alert."

Illya stood motionless in the private car aisle.

He looked around at the luxurious appointments. Everything was arranged for the animal comfort of men of wealth and power. Men like Harrison Howell.

Howell had been poor in his youth. He'd worked his way through school, majoring in geology. His first job had been with an oil company. Now his holdings in oil ringed the world.

Illya shook his head. When the train bearing Howell had vanished, U.N.C.L.E. had made a routine check into his background, trying to find some hidden evil. The computers found none. Howell had indulged himself, making all the wishful dreams of an under-privileged boy come true, but he had been honest, hard-working, unselfish, patriotic, in no way linked with subversive factions such as THRUSH.

Illya prowled the car. He had searched his own mind for some logical explanation, and had found none.

Assigned to this trip by Alexander Waverly, he had not held much hope for its success.

Now, alone in this car, he could not shake a sense of unexplained, mounting tension.

"Keep busy, Illya," he told himself aloud, for no better reason than that hearing his own voice was reassuring in the eerie silence as the streamliner raced west through the night.

He checked over his own arsenal of latest U.N.C.L.E. designed gimmicks for communication and self-protection. The machine pistol that assembled from light weight parts that served other purposes as well. The small button in his lapel that transmitted its own "bleep" received only in United Command headquarters.

He moved along the aisle, thinking that he was equipped with the latest inventions, and yet he was on a witch-hunting errand. Could fifteen-car trains actually vanish in this modern world?

He could not rid himself of that rising feeling of something wrong.

What could be wrong? He bent over and stared through the thick windows at the night country whipped past on the hundred-mile-an-hour wind drift. Great, rich country, its people sleeping in security in their beds. The wan lights of a midwest village flared by, then the distant glow of a farm house window.

It was all too normal to support the idea of unearthly disappearance; yet, he waited, tense for the unknown into which this train raced.

At the furbished desk, Illya lifted the intra-train phone, pressed the engine button.

After a moment a man's casual voice spoke, "Engineer."

Illya said, "Kuryakin in the special car."

"You living it up, Mr. Kuryakin?" the engineer asked.

"I don't know," Illya said. "That's what I called you to find out."

The engineer laughed. "If it was any smoother, Mr. Kuryakin, we'd be flying."

Illya replaced the phone, aware that he was less than reassured by the engineer's confidence. A train had disappeared a week ago.

Still, hundreds of trains had covered this same tracks, night and day, before and after that strange disappearance.

The railroad people had made every effort to conceal the loss. Failing this, they'd tried to minimize it while they retraced the known run foot by foot. The railings appeared unaltered, there was nothing to suggest any calamity.

It was simply as if the fifteen cars, the special sleeper, and all its people had simply ceased to exist.

"We were called in at United Command," Alexander Waverly had told Illya and Solo in the command room three days earlier, "when world-wide panic might ensue if more publicized agencies were at work. We here at the command have determined to make up an exact duplicate of the vanished Chieftain down to the special sleeper in which Harrison Howell rode."

Now, Illya watched the night world skim past in darkness and sudden, quickly lost lights. The duplicate Chieftain had been altered in only one way. Illya himself had installed the United Command bleep-signal which would emanate from the train no matter where it went. These bleeps were being monitored on special receivers in United Network's command room.

Illya smiled. It was as if the entire evil-fighting organization rode this train with him.

Yet why did the hackles rise at the nape of his neck? Why couldn't he escape the sense of an impending wrong so incredible that even the full forces of United Command might be helpless against it?

"These thoughts don't make sense," Illya told himself aloud. "It's just another assignment, like returning a book to the library. And you can handle it."

Nevertheless, the slowing of the train went through him like a sudden electric shock and he lunged for the desk, grabbing up the phone, signaling the engineer.

"Engineer."

"What's wrong?" Illya asked. "Why are you slowing?"

"Just a water stop, Mr. Kuryakin," the engineer said.

"Why didn't you let me know?"

The engineer's voice sharpened. "You'll find the stop listed, Mr. Kuryakin, if you'd bothered to check the trip pattern."

"How long will we be stopped here?" Illya said.

But there was no answer. The engineer had replaced his receiver.

Abruptly, the train shook like a wet dog, the metal parts grinding and squealing in protest.

The lights flashed out, but came on again immediately.

The train was sinking, straight downward. It was not as if it were entering a tunnel, but as if the fifteen cars were being lowered via some kind of elevator!

Illya rushed to the door. He grabbed the knob, turning it. The door was locked.

Illya did not even bother checking it; the door was somehow electronically sealed, as if the door were frozen into its framing.

Heeling around, Illya caught up the nearest heavy object and ran to the windows with it.

He stopped, holding the bar aloft, useless. It was heavy enough to break the thick glass, but beyond them were walls of solid rock like close-pressed subway tunneling.

The train continued to plunge straight downward toward the center of the earth.

Illya jerked the sender-receiver from his jacket pocket. He pressed the button. "Uncle Charley, come in. Mayday. Come in, Uncle Charley. Acknowledge please. Over."

There was no sound. The instrument was dead metal in his hand. He loosed his fingers, letting the small sender slip from his grip to the floor.

The lights flared up and then were doused, putting the car into stygian darkness, a pall of gloom that pressed in hot and thick and suffocating.

THREE

Napoleon Solo stood in the United Network Command Room and stared at the blank screen of the instant-bulletin set.

A kind of creeping helplessness immobilized him.

Other men, of every age and nationality, moved around him, each wearing the same electronic identification badge that he wore, all of them vitally concerned in this latest unnerving disorder that left the world-wide organization impotent and disabled.

Though the others acted, trying to find ways around the crippled machinery, Solo remained staring at that silent screen, as if paralyzed by its sudden failure.

Slender, of medium height, Solo was a warmly handsome young man who might have been a doctor, lawyer, advertising executive, accountant—anything except what he was: a highly-rated precision-trained enforcement agent for what had become the most important secret service agency in the world, the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement.

Solo pulled his gaze from the lifeless screen, forcing his mind away from the moment when every sound from the Chieftain ceased.

"They reached the water stop," Waverly was saying, reconstructing the final moments of communication. "We lost contact. However, the bleep-signal remained clear for—for how long, Mr. Solo?"

Solo looked up, his face drawn. "The bleep stopped three minutes after the train slowed for the water stop, sir."

"Have they been able to pick it up again?" Waverly asked.

Solo shook his head. "Negative, sir. We have agents on the spot. They report no trace of the train. It did not stop for water, by the way."

Waverly shifted papers on his desk. He scowled, studying the men ringed before him. Slowly, the machines and computers came to life on the walls around him. New coded messages were place before him.

He said, "There must be no panic. We have had a moment of complete breakdown here. But it is only momentary. There is some logical explanation for this, for all of this. Our communications cannot fail like this, not without some detectable cause. Two fifteen-car streamliner trains cannot vanish off their rails without logical explanation."

Waverly pushed his graying hair back from his lined forehead. No one in United Command knew Waverly's exact age. Solo wondered wryly if even the computers could give such information. Contrary to popular belief, the computers were not infallible. Lord help anybody programming Alexander Waverly's age into any United Command machinery!

Waverly's brilliant record in military and intelligence dated back to the first world war. He was one of the five men—of different nations—heading the far-flung operations of United Command. Age was his enemy—and so far Alexander Waverly had been able to walk on its face.

Solo said, "I'm ready to fly out immediately, sir."

Waverly's gaze fixed on him from beneath bushy brows. "Fly out, Mr. Solo? Where?"

Solo glanced at the silent screen of the instant-bulletin. It was his last contact with Illya Kuryakin, somehow seemed his final hope for finding him. "I imagined you'd want me to go out to the place where the second train disappeared, sir."

Waverly shook his head. "Negative."

Solo scowled. "But, sir. Illya was on that train—" He saw the older man's face and stopped.

Waverly nodded. "I assure you, Mr. Solo, we will make every effort to locate Mr. Kuryakin, as well as the two trains which somehow seem to have dissolved into thin air."

"Isn't the place where the train disappeared the place to start looking for Illya?"

"It might seem to be—"

"Before something happens to him."

Waverly's head jerked up. "Just a moment, Mr. Solo. We cannot let emotionalism enter into this, no matter how we might feel about Mr. Kuryakin. Surely I don't have to remind a professional such as you that there are larger issues at jeopardy here."

Solo exhaled heavily. "I'm sorry, sir."

Waverly's voice was flat. "As you yourself stated a few moments ago, we have U.N.C.L.E. agents on the scene where the train was last heard from. None has reported any trace of the lost streamliner. I am aware of the great personal peril Mr. Kuryakin faces at this moment, but these are risks we take—that all of us must be prepared to take.

I'm sorry, but perhaps the scene of the calamity might not be the best place to begin our search—for either Illya Kuryakin, or the missing trains."

Solo frowned, waiting. He could no longer oppose anything Waverly ordered. He had the same pride and faith in Waverly that he had in the United Command itself.

He waited, knowing that Waverly would send him out of this chrome, steel and glass office—that no matter what the command, he would try to execute it.

Waverly tapped his unlighted pipe.

"I don't have to spell it out for you, Mr. Solo," he said. "I'm sure the same thought has occurred to both of us."

Solo nodded.

"I know, sir. The pattern has suddenly changed."

He looked out the window, summoning up his thoughts.

"Yes," he said, "Before this it at least was one at a time. Isolated, mysterious disappearances. Buddy Evans, a second-string Red Sox catcher, vanished on his way to spring training. Never seen again. Just went off the face of the earth—and on his way to collect a fat bonus for signing."

Waverly said, "The Jeanne Lynch case. A premiere danseuse with the Sadler Wells ballet. Never showed up for a sold-out performance of *Swan Lake.* Never seen again."

"There was quite a few of them," Solo said.

"Eleven hundred and thirty-six," Waverly said grimly. "Plus three unconfirmed. Most of them were not celebrities, so the cases got no great national notice, Mr. Solo."

Napoleon said, "I see what you mean, sir. It was as though they—whoever they are—had been trying out some devilish abduction plan, testing it on individuals until they were sure it would work. Now they're sure. Now—entire train."

Solo sighed. "And tomorrow—God knows."

Alexander Waverly said gravely, "You said 'They—whoever they are.' I think we—er—have a pretty good idea, Mr. Solo. Only one organization in the world would have the audacity, the powerful scope, the sheer tenacity of evil to dare this monstrous thing."

THRUSH!

Neither of them had to say it. The thought hung over them like a deadly, unseen nimbus of doom.

Solo drew a deep breath. "What are my orders, sir?"

Waverly allowed a faint smile, "I'm sending you to the Maynard Ranch in the Sawtooth ranges of Wyoming—"

"The place where the cattle disappeared?"

Waverly nodded. "Without a trace, without a hoof-print, or any other sign."

Solo frowned. "But you said we had no proof these two incidents were in any way related."

"I want you to get that proof."

Solo nodded. "You have some reason to believe there is a link, sir?"

Waverly thumbed through taped reports before him. "We have our computers' estimates that the incidents of missing train and vanished cattle are related." Waverly shrugged. "It's up to you, Mr. Solo, because I confess to you that's all we have to go on—the computers and my instinct."

Solo frowned because he'd never heard Waverly make just such a remark before. Waverly eschewed anything unscientific. "Instinct, sir?"

Waverly nodded. "That's how helpless we are, Mr. Solo. I'm placing my hopes on instinct now. My instinct tells me that the missing cattle and disappearing trains are all part of the same plan. How? I don't know. Nor does any one, except—THRUSH."

FOUR

Napoleon Solo stepped out of the station wagon that transported him from the Union Pacific station at Cripple Bend to the Maynard Bar-M Ranch.

A sense of unnatural silence was oppressive in the Wyoming afternoon. The ranch house looked to be at least seventy years old, built of fieldstones and mountain spruce, reconditioned with central heating and every luxury for dude ranchers.

It was a working ranch, too, deep in the rocky foothills of the inaccessible Sawtooth mountains.

Carlos Maynard prowled his littered office like a hobbled mustang. He stared at Solo, sitting in a straight chair tilted against the wall.

"It isn't that you aren't welcome here, Solo. You are! A very distinguished visitor, and I'm glad to know somebody is doing something! You're not a cop, are you?"

Solo shrugged. "You have somebody you want arrested, Mr. Maynard?"

The harried rancher grinned despite himself. "No. But maybe I'd feel better if you could make an arrest if we need one."

"First, we better find out what really happened," Solo suggested mildly.

Maynard shrugged. "I'll buy that. You can count on me for all the help I can give you. Only I can tell you, I feel pretty helpless about now."

"We all do."

"I just want you to understand. I'll do anything I can to help you people, but my first interest has got to be getting my cattle back."

Solo watched him. "If we can solve why they disappeared, Mr. Maynard, we should be able to find them."

Maynard nodded. "I hope so. Frankly, I stand to be ruined. No sense trying to hide that from you. People are scared. Scared to come here. Scared to stay after they do get here. We got some pretty wild rumors going around, I can tell you. Ghost riders. No matter how much I warn the men who work

for me to knock off that kind of talk, it persists. And who are we to say? Maybe ghost riders did just drive my cattle out into the sky. They sure didn't leave any tracks behind them."

"Just hang on, Mr. Maynard. I think the ghosts will be real enough, once we track them down."

"I hope so. Because it won't take much more to put me out of business. People come here, and they hear about those cattle. Then they get scared, and they take off! Any way you look at it, I stand to lose. First my customers, and even some of my men are afraid to ride up there in the Sawtooth Mountains. The worst part of it is, I can't blame them."

Solo stood up. "People clearing out fast, eh?"

"Right. They come in, hear some of the stories and the rumors, get scared, and clear out soon as they hear about it."

"Not all of them," Solo said. He walked past the puzzled rancher, grabbed the doorknob and jerked the door open.

A girl sprawled forward into the den. She landed on her knees, awkwardly.

"Why, Miss Finnish!" Carlos stared at her.

The girl caught herself. She stayed a moment on all fours, then got up alone when neither Solo nor Maynard moved to aid her. Her eyes were unafraid.

Solo stared at her. The looks of her were as heady as brandy. From profile to brand new riding boots she was like something tailored by angels. Her shoulder-length hair seemed to have the sun roosting in it, even in the darkened office. She wasn't tall but she looked as if nothing had been stinted in perfect packaging. She wore buckskin skirt, frilly vest, a pale green shirt with matching neckerchief at her throat.

Her cheeks were fiery red. She stared from Solo to Maynard, shaking her head.

She straightened, heeled around and almost ran from the room.

Maynard stood, mouth ajar, staring after her.

Solo couldn't blame him. She even looked exciting going away from you.

"Not all of them are running away from what they can hear," Solo said.

Maynard gazed through the opened door. "Yeah. Mabel Finnish. She arrived here two days after the cattle disappeared. Come to think of it, she's been here ever since. Nothing has scared her away."

"As a matter of fact, she can't seem to hear enough," Solo suggested.

Maynard didn't answer, only stood, frowning, puzzled.

Pete Wasson went over his story again for Solo.

They sat on the bunkhouse stoop, along with Marty Nichelson and Maynard.

Pete said, "That's right, I rode northwest up into the Sawtooth ranges—"

"There was a pretty clear trail in the foothills," Maynard said. "Then, up in the lava spikes, we lost them. But Pete and Marty are good trackers. We sent Marty up there first, then Pete. But they lost any trace of the cattle."

"Could a flash flood have washed away the tracks?" Solo asked.

"Could have, if there'd been any flash flood," Carlos Maynard said. "But there wasn't any rain. Hasn't been none in weeks. No matter what Pete thinks."

Solo watched the young cowpuncher. "So what happened is, you rode looking for sign—"

"Right. Ought to be able to find sign of some kind of a thousand head—"

"And you fell, cracked your skull?" Solo said. "That's what happened?"

"Yes. I told you. I must have fallen."

"What time was it?" Solo said. "Morning? Afternoon? Late evening?"

Pete scowled, staring at him. He shook his head. "I swear to you, I don't know."

Maynard and Nichelson stared at each other.

Solo said to Pete, "You mind taking off your hat?"

Pete frowned, puzzled. "I don't mind, but why should I?"

Solo shrugged. "Let's just say you're being polite to Miss Finnish out there under that cottonwood tree. She hasn't taken her eyes off us."

Solo heard Maynard's intake of breath. "By golly, there she is. Hanging around. You reckon she can hear what we say?"

Solo shrugged. "She might have some kind of listening device, but it seems to me that she's reading lips."

Maynard swore. "Looks like we better check into her."

"We'll check her out," Solo agreed. "But we better take things in order of importance." He moved his fingers expertly across Pete's scalp.

"What you mean?" Maynard said, watching him check the cowboy's skull.

"We have more urgent matters," Solo said. "Like Pete's scalp."

"What about Pete's scalp?" Maynard whispered.

Even Mabel Finnish under the cottonwood tree appeared to be holding her breath.

"Yeah." Pete straightened. "What you looking for in my head, Solo?"

"If you fell from your horse, and struck your head hard enough to knock yourself out for three days, Pete," Solo said, "shouldn't there be some kind of knot on your skull?"

Pete Wasson stood up slowly. His eyes were thoughtful.

"How about that?" he whispered. "There ain't no knot on my head. Funny. Nobody thought about that."

"What's going on here?" Marty Nichelson said.

"That's what we've got to find out," Solo told him. "Can you tell me anything about your headache—and some of the things you did in Cripple Bend for three days?"

Marty frowned. "Well, nothing's clear, Solo. But that don't mean I'm lying!"

"Me either," Pete said. "Even if there ain't no knot on my head, I ain't lying."

"And I was in Cripple Bend. That ought to be easy enough to prove. People would of seen me there, wouldn't they?"

"Looks like it," Solo agreed. "Meantime, either one of you object to taking a polygraph test?"

"What's that?" Pete asked cautiously.

"A lie detector," Solo said. "I don't think either one of you is lying purposely, but a test might help you."

Marty and Pete stared at each other. Marty shrugged. "I got no objections. It all happened just like I said. It ain't clear to me, but I ain't lying."

"You got one of them lie detectors?" Pete said.

"We can have one by tomorrow," Solo said. "If neither one of you objects."

"Sure." Pete said. "Marty and me are willing. We ain't trying to hide nothing. If one of them things will help get at the truth, I want to know."

FIVE

Solo parked the Maynard Ranch station wagon outside the City Bar on the single street in the settlement at Cripple Bend. The town was the last lingering trace of the old west, but battered cars baked at the curbs instead of workhorses.

He walked into the bar, found it almost deserted in the middle of the morning.

"What can I do for you?" The voice was musical and warm.

Solo was mildly astonished but pleased to find that the cowtown bartender was a woman. She looked to be in her middle twenties, and enough to drive strong men to drink. Her blond hair was brushed upward on her head, piled there in rich waves. Her eyes were like a sparkling wine, glittering with promises. She wore a pastel dress and a fresh apron.

Solo ordered a beer and sat at the bar, turning it in his fingers.

"You're staying at the Maynard Dude Ranch," the bartender said. "Came from New York. Two suitcases—"

"You don't miss much, do you?"

"April. Name's April Caution." She smiled across the bar. "Small town like this, nobody misses much."

"Guess you'll know Marty Nichelson pretty well, then?

"Marty? Sure. Everybody knows him. Good kid. Been with Carlos Maynard a couple years. Used to take prize money in rodeos until he cracked his hip."

"Hear he was in here and tied on a real binge—"

"Who? Marty?" April straightened, frowning.

Solo nodded, watching her. "That's the talk," he said. "But it's no secret. Marty was talking about it himself. He was telling me about the tree days he spent here in Cripple Bend—most of it here in your place—on a bender. Now I've seen you, I can understand why he stayed for three days."

"There's something wrong here, mister," April Caution said, her face puzzled. She straightened when the door swung open at the street entrance.

Solo glance across his shoulder, but he was not even astonished to see that Mabel Finnish had entered the tavern.

Mabel didn't speak to him. She went to a table near the bar and sat down.

April said, "Just a minute. We'll kick this around, as soon as I wait on the lady."

"Why don't you come up to the bar, Miss Finnish?" Solo asked. "You won't be as comfortable, but you can hear better."

Mabel Finnish's lovely face flushed, but she did not answer. She ordered a daiquiri. April mixed the rum drink, delivered it and then came back to the bar, sat on a stool facing Solo.

"I been thinking this thing over, about Marty," she said. "When was he supposed to have tied one on in here?"

"About a week and a half ago," Solo said.

April shook her head. "Oh, no. Not in here. Marty hasn't been in here in over a month."

Solo sat a moment, staring at a wet place on the bar. "But there's been a lot of talk about Marty's being in here. Hasn't anybody from the ranch been in to check on it?"

April shrugged. "What's to check? I tell you Marty hasn't been in here in weeks."

Solo sighed. "Any other tavern in Cripple Bend where he could have been on a prolonged drunk?"

April smiled. "No other place in town to buy liquor. Nearest bar is in the next settlement, and that's over seventy miles away. No. If Marty was on a drunk, he'd have been in here—only I can tell you, he hasn't been in."

A few minutes later, Solo walked out of the City Bar. He paused on the board walk, stared both ways along the sleepy street. Then he glance over his shoulder at Mabel, drinking alone at the table inside the tavern.

He strode along the walk, going past the ranch station wagon. He walked beyond the feed store, then stepped around the corner, pressed himself against the adobe wall, waiting.

It was a short wait. He heard Mabel's bootheels clattering on the boards as she half ran in pursuit. She slowed, then stopped, looking around puzzled, a few feet from where Solo stood.

Solo stepped out upon the walk immediately behind Mabel. He caught her arm.

Mabel heeled around. Solo fixed her with an unyielding smile. "Looking for anyone we know, Mabel?"

"Let me go."

"I let you go, but you don't go. Why? Do you find me that fascinating, Miss Finnish?"

Mabel shivered slightly. "I don't find you fascinating at all."

"You disappoint me. I had such high regard for your taste. Tell me, if I'm not your type, why do you follow me around?"

She winced, looked helplessly both ways along the sun-stricken street. "Maybe you just happen to go all the same places I must go."

"An interesting theory. Maybe you can tell me why you want to go all these places where I so inconveniently show up—just ahead of you."

"Need I remind you, Mr. Solo? It's a free country. I can go where I like?"

He continued to smile, coldly. "And let me remind you. Freedom and life are being threatened here. It's no game. I won't play by any rules that will please you. I might even get rough. Now, shall we try again? What are you doing here?"

"Because I heard that one thousand of Mr. Maynard's cattle disappeared without a trace."

"Are you interested in cattle? Or disappearances?"

Mabel's head tilted slightly. "Like everyone else, I heard that two huge trains also disappeared without a trace."

Solo stopped smiling. He shook his head, puzzled. "And that's why you came here?"

She met his gave levelly. "Doesn't the name Finnish mean anything to you, Mr. Solo?"

Solo frowned, filtering the name through his mind. There was the faintest stirring of recall. He shook his head. "Should it?"

"Leonard Finnish," she said. "He was a geologist known all over the world. He was my grandfather. He disappeared without leaving a trace."

"On one of those trains?"

She shook her head. "My grandfather disappeared five years ago."

"Here in the Sawtooth mountains?"

"No. Grandfather vanished while on a geology expedition in Death Valley, in California."

Solo nodded, remembering. "Yes. He was exploring some subterranean caverns in Death Valley, but that's fifteen hundred miles from here."

"Yes. And five years ago. Still, he did vanish without a trace. Just as the cattle and the trains disappeared. Is it so wild that I'd look for my grandfather here—try to learn all I can about these disappearances? You're here. Yet those trains disappeared in Indiana, didn't they, Mr. Solo?"

Solo smiled, released her arm. "Checkmate."

SIX

Solo set up the polygraph machine in Maynard's ranch house den. He was checking it out when the door was thrown open and Maynard burst into the room.

The rancher's sun-tanned face was gray. His eyes were distended. He said, "Solo. The bunkhouse. You better come. Quick."

Maynard turned on his heel and Solo followed. The few dude ranchers remaining on the place eyed them silently, coldly as they passed. These people stood up, tense, watchful.

They found the same chilled reception at the bunkhouse. The ranch hands were taut, eyes bleak and troubled.

Maynard thrust open the bunkhouse door and Solo followed him inside it.

Inside the room, Solo slowed, stopped, staring at the men on the bunks.

"Pete and Marty," Maynard said. "They got violently ill last night. Mabel Finnish drove into Cripple Bend to fetch Doc Cullin, but I don't think she'll make it."

Maynard was right. Marty died before Doc Cullin arrived, and there was nothing the medic could do to save Pete.

Maynard caught the doctor's arm. "Why? What caused them to die like that, Doc?"

Cullin shook his head. "I don't know, Carlos. There are no physical signs of any kind. We'll just have to wait for the autopsy."

That evening Solo was working on his daily report when there was a knock at his door in the upstairs of the ranch house. He said, "Come in."

The door opened and Doctor Cullin entered. "Maynard said I should give you the results of the autopsy report, Mr. Solo. Autopsy shows the presence of a nerve gas in the lungs of both men. Death was caused by strangulation; that nerve gas had been in them for some days slowly choking them."

Solo gazed at the doctor, then stared beyond him at Mabel Finnish, standing gray-faced in his doorway.

ACT II: INCIDENT OF THE MISSING CASTLE

The train hurtled downward into the belly of the earth. The stifling darkness shrouded the car where Illya braced himself against the plunging descent.

Breathing was difficult, movement almost impossible. It seemed to Illya as the train lowered that his body became heavier with increased tug of gravity.

Suddenly there was the creaking of giant chains and winches. The train trembled as the huge lift settled into a brilliantly illumined cavern and came to rest.

Illya ran to the windows. Beyond the train, fluorescent lighting made the high-domed caverns brighter than sunlight. Yet Illya knew they were miles beneath the surface of the earth.

He checked the small sender attached to his lapel. Its transistors were in perfect order, its continual flow of bleeps flared unchecked—into the solid rock surrounding him. The small instrument was useless.

From outside the sealed car Illya heard the sounds of men running, shouting.

He wheeled around from the windows. From his jacket he took the components of his machine pistol, working swiftly. He tried to force his fingers to react more swiftly, but there was a languid heaviness to all his movements.

He set the barrel of the pistol into its stock, screwing it into place. But even as he worked he knew he would not work swiftly enough.

There was a whispered sound, as if some magnetic seal had been released. Doors at each end of the custom-built car swung open, suddenly freed.

The gush of machine-driven air filled the car. Illya straightened, feeling unexplained panic.

He took a backward step as the first warmth rushed over him. It enveloped him like some invisible cloak, striking him down to his knees as if it were a physical blow.

Stunned, Illya twisted half around under the unseen impact. He caught at a seat, but fell to his knees. The machine pistol was driven from his grasp, hurled to the floor some feet from him.

Striking on his knees, Illya stared at the gun, concentrating upon it, scrambling toward it.

"He's here! Take him!"

Illya's head jerked up. Men rushed into the car through the opened doors. The gusts of heated gas seemed to have ebbed.

Staring at the men rushing toward him, Illya grasped out for the machine pistol. In horror he saw his hand strike the gun and lie helpless upon it.

Lift it. Pick it up. Lift it. His mind sent frantic messages to his hand, but his fingers remained stiff, straight.

He could not close them.

Helplessly, sprawled like a bug on the car flooring, Illya stared upward incredulously at the men surrounding him.

His eyes widened. These men looked as if they were like him—or once had been. But all had undergone some strange metamorphosis down here. They were alike in body, with the roundness of moles or fat underground rats. They moved with their heads bent forward, peering through thick-lensed glasses as if life below surface was steadily destroying their sense of sight. Most appalling of all was the doughy pallor of their faces, their bodies—beings who lived shut away from the memory of sunlight.

Illya struggled frantically on the flooring. He managed to lift his weighted, slowly-responding body to his knees. But he could rise no further.

Illya hung there, supported on leaden arms, head drooping between his shoulders. He panted through parted lips, aware suddenly that he was breathing something that was not oxygen—this warm gas was slowly paralyzing his muscles and his body.

He tried to speak, tried to cry out.

It was like a nightmare. He was unable to make a sound.

He reached out one more time for the machine pistol and almost sprawled on his face.

Deep, guttural laughter spewed down over him.

One of the mole men reached down, took up the machine pistol, examining it with interest.

It took an eternity, but Illya managed to lift his head. The men stood, peering squint-eyed through their thick glasses at him, their faces pulled into savage caricatures of something they remembered as laughter.

The laughter raked at him and Illya tried to cry out. He could not force a sound past his lips. His throat felt swollen, closed. He tried to brace himself, but had no muscular coordination. The warm thick pressure of that strange sick-sweet gas closed upon him like an occluding fog.

He toppled helplessly upon the floor, suffocating and paralyzed, the sound of the weird, wicked laughter raging in his ears.

And then the warmth darkened around him, shutting out everything except that laughter, and this spun like enraged hornets inside his mind.

TWO

The unbroken, whispered clatter of his wrist-watch alarm awakened Solo an hour before dawn.

For a moment he lay unmoving, protected from the chilled Wyoming darkness, from all the unknown that lay ahead of him.

From the corral below he heard movement and subdued voices of men calling to each other. Wind riffled the curtains at the windows.

Solo yawned, throwing back the covers.

A shard rap sounded at his door. Maynard's whispered voice came through the facing. "Your horse and pack are ready, Mr. Solo."

"Thanks," Solo said. "I'll be right down."

He swung out of bed, snapped on the small bed-lamp. He slipped his legs into corduroy trousers, and then stood up, donning a heavy shirt.

The whispering, dry-hinge creak of his balcony door, brought him wheeling around.

The door pushed slowly open, Solo caught up his gun, but dropped it when he recognized Mabel Finnish. She moved in from his balcony.

He stared at her. She was dressed for the trail in slacks, heavy jacket and riding boots.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"What makes you think I'm going anywhere?"

"Let's not waste time, Mr. Solo. You're riding alone up into the Sawtooth ranges looking for some trace of those missing cattle, and I'm going with you."

"Nobody but Maynard knew my plan. How did you find it out?"

She gave him a faint smile. "I may as well tell you the whole truth—"

"That will be refreshing."

"I have a small listening device. I hear what I must. It's like a hearing aid, only concealed, and much more powerful. I'm sorry to force myself upon you like this, Mr. Solo, but I have no choice."

"I could think of several—"

"I must find my grandfather. That's all that matters to me. I have to know what you say, what you learn about the disappearance of those cattle, just as I must go with you."

"I'm sorry. That's impossible."

Mabel seemed not even to hear him. "I can be of help to you."

"I don't need your help."

"I've been on those trails."

"I have maps of the ranges. I know where the cattle were last seen. No, I'm sorry, Mabel. It's too dangerous. I don't have to tell you that Pete and Marty died because they were up there. They were attacked by some kind of nerve gas and it was fatal. I can't expose you to such danger."

Her head lifted. "I'm not afraid."

Solo's jaw was taut. "Well, I've sense enough to be afraid for you."

"You don't understand, Mr. Solo. You're wasting time. I'm going with you."

"Then you're bigger and stronger than you look."

"I'm big enough and strong enough, Mr. Solo."

He grinned. "And lovely enough. I'm truly sorry I can't take you with me."

"I told you." Her voice became deadly. "You'll take me, or you won't go."

He laughed, turning slowly. "How do you plan to stop me?"

For the first time Solo saw the gun in Mabel's hand. He saw something else, too. Her grip was steady. Her finger was firm on the trigger. She knew how to use that small firearm, and she would not hesitate to do it.

Her voice mocked him. "Now do you understand why I'll go with you? I won't hesitate to shoot you."

"What will that buy you?"

"That's it, Mr. Solo. It won't buy either of us anything. That's why I hope you'll be smart enough to take me. I know the mission you're on is urgent to you. But my search is even more urgent to me. I'm sorry, Mr. Solo, but I'm desperate—"

"Enough to shoot me?"

He watched her, but the gun in her hand did not waver.

She nodded. "I'm desperate enough to do anything that will help me to learn the truth about my grandfather. I *know* his disappearance is somehow related to all this. I've got to find out."

"If I find your grandfather, I'll bring him back. I promise that."

The muzzle of her gun tilted slightly. "That's not good enough, Mr. Solo. I go with you or nobody goes. That's up to you now."

Solo chewed at his lip a moment studying her, and that unwavering gun in her fist. He shrugged his shoulders, giving her a reluctant grin of capitulation. "I've been wondering all along how to beg you to ride out with me, Miss Finnish."

Mabel sighed out heavily. "You're very wise, Mr. Solo."

He lifted his hands deprecatingly. "It's really very easy to be wise, Miss Finnish, with a gun staring you in the face."

THREE

They climbed steadily into the blue-hazed heights of the Sawtooths, the silences deepening through the morning, noon.

There were no longer even any trails on these lava-scarred mesas. The uncharted wilds had been tortured into ridges and ravines by countless suns and mountain winds.

They reached a treeless escarpment by midafternoon. Solo halted the horses.

Shifting in his saddle, he gazed downward along the way they'd come. It was as if they were the only human beings in the breathless world of sand-scarred boulders.

Their horses slipped, fighting for footing on the slate outcroppings.

Far below them sprawled waterless plains, vast and uninhabited; above them reared inaccessible plateaus, crags jutting against the sky, massive ranges lost inside monstrous mountains, trackless and forgotten.

Solo shivered slightly. He glanced at Mabel. "I never really knew what the word desolate truly meant until today."

"The silence is unbelievable," she said. "Not even a bird, or an animal."

He sighed. "What are you really doing up here, Mabel?"

She frowned. "I told you. I'm looking for my grandfather."

"I know. It just doesn't add up."

"Nevertheless, it's true."

"Is it? I keep asking myself, why should a young, beautiful girl like you spend her life looking for a man who has been missing for five years?"

"That man is my grandfather, Mr. Solo."

"But he must be dead. They would have found some trace of him."

"Have they found any trace of your trains, Mr. Solo?"

He frowned. "But you. So young. Looks like you'd marry, have a family—"

"It's more important to me to find my grandfather. I know he's alive. He was a very great man, Mr. Solo. I never met another man worth taking me from the search for him."

Solo smiled despite himself. "You're a strange girl."

"It's a strange world, Mr. Solo." She prodded her horse and moved away.

Solo rode slowly. He could not explain why, but felt himself growing taut.

He stiffened in the saddle, searched the boulders and the cliffs around him, moving his gaze slowly, peering. He found nothing, yet the feeling increased that they had ridden into trouble.

There was a sudden, subtle shift in the atmosphere. It was nothing he could explain, yet it was there. The sun was unchanged, undiminished, cresting far to the west of them. The brilliant haze lay across rocks and outcroppings, but there was a difference between this plateau and the land below them.

Troubled, Solo was aware of a faint, but persistent ache in his temples. A headache! Hadn't this been the sign Pete and Marty both noticed first up here?

Something else nagged at Solo. Then he remembered. Mabel had said it. There were no birds, no animals, not even a lizard or a mouse.

He was aware that Mabel had shifted in her saddle and stared back at him, a faint smile twisting her lovely mouth. "What's wrong, Solo?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I only know that something is wrong."

"It's your imagination."

"Perhaps." Solo reached up, messaging his temples. "Why don't we stop for coffee?"

Mabel laughed, but agreed. They swung down, ground-tied their horses.

Mabel sat on a small boulder. She watched Solo gather grease-wood sticks and start a small fire between two smooth stones. He placed the smoked coffee pot on it; soon the aroma of coffee obscured everything else.

Solo hunkered beside the fire. His eyes ached now, but he remained alert, watchful. He was troubled, though there were no sounds except the crackle of the fire, the bubble of the boiling coffee water, the snuffling of the tethered horses.

"You're scared, Solo." Mabel's voice raked at him.

He glanced up. "Sometimes you have to be smart enough to be scared. Did you know that's how man learned to exist in this world—by being scared first?"

"What scares you up here?" she inquired.

He shook his head. "Everything. Nothing. I've the unshakable feeling that we're being watched."

"Watched?" She laughed. "By whom? By what?"

"I don't know." Solo stared into the fire. "Mabel, something is wrong—and has been for the past hour or so."

Mabel laughed, watching him pour steaming black coffee into tin cups. "It's just your nerves."

He shrugged. "Maybe."

She laughed louder. "Do your corns ache when it rains, Solo?"

He stared at her, frowning. From his vest pocket he removed a small aspirin-sized tin box. He opened it, took out two small purple capsules.

"What's that, Solo?"

He offered her one of the capsules. "It's an antidotes for nerve gas."

"Nerve gas?"

"We may walk into it at any minute, Mabel. Maybe we have already."

She shook her head.

He shrugged, said nothing. She refused to take the capsule. He closed his fist, holding it.

She watched him take a purple capsule, wash it down with the coffee.

"It isn't that I'm not grateful," she said, "but I don't believe we're going to find anything like that up here."

"I hope you're right." Suddenly Solo stiffened.

Mabel stared at him. "What's the matter now?"

Solo came upward slightly, staring past her. "Didn't you hear that?"

She jerked her head around. "I didn't hear anything."

"There it is again," Solo said.

While Mabel was turned, staring across her shoulder, he reached out, opened his fist and dropped the purple capsule into her tin coffee cup.

She turned back, frowning. "You're cracking up, Solo. I didn't hear anything."

Solo sighed and shrugged. He sat back, relaxed, watching her drink down her coffee.

FOUR

"How much further are we climbing before we make camp?" Mabel asked an hour later as they rode falteringly upward.

Solo check the sun.

"Not much longer," he said. "No sense taking a chance riding. A horse can break a leg."

"You worry like a mother hen," Mabel taunted. She prodded her horse, riding suddenly swiftly ahead.

She screamed, throwing her arms up before her face. She twisted, falling from the saddle.

Solo urged his mount forward, but it was as if he rode into an invisible wall. Something struck him and he was driven from his saddle.

Solo went sprawling outward, face first. It was not as though he fell, rather as if he were being thrust downward with terrible force by unseen hands.

The two horses reared, squealing. They tried to run forward, but their way was blocked by this invisible wall. But when they wheeled about, in panic, they were unable to run downhill, either.

Solo struck the ground hard. He felt the savage bite of lava spikes. He rolled along the shale shelf, trying to set himself. He was helpless.

He turned, seeing Mabel huddled on rock outcroppings.

"Mabel!"

He yelled her name again, but she did not answer. She didn't move. He lifted himself slowly to his hands and knees, feeling as if he were fighting incredible downward thrust. He fought against this pressure, lunging upward.

He cried out in agony.

It was as if his head struck solid stone. He shuddered, staggering to his knees, rolled helplessly over upon his back.

For one more moment the mountain side skidded around him, the boulders and the clouds changing places, like skittering bats.

He fought against the darkness that blacked out everything. He pushed upward, but could not rise. But this time when he fell, he went plunging downward into darkness where he was conscious of nothing, not even the pain.

Solo had no idea how long he was unconscious.

He forced his eyes open, conscious of the lancing pain, the throbbing in his temples. It was deep dusk, almost full dark, or else an impairment of vision laid an occluding fog on everything.

He tilted his head, saw that Mabel had not stirred. The horses had fallen, and they lay still on the rocks.

He moved his eyes, searching. Nothing appeared to have altered. The incredible emptiness reached outward in every direction. Ghost Riders, he thought. He tried to drive the mindless idea from his brain. He could not do it. He was convinced that he was surrounded by menacing beings, yet he could not see them. They threw him on the ground, and they held him helplessly when he attempted to rise.

He struggled again to get to his knees, but though there were no ties on him, no ropes, or chains, it was as if he were bound.

The nerve gas.

Stunned, Solo lay helplessly on his back, staring at the darkening sky. He and Mabel had ridden into an invisible wall—odorless, colorless nerve gas, clouds and banks of it. Both Pete and Marty must have ridden up the mountains to this place. This gas was what the two cowpokes had inhaled—the fatal fumes.

It had left them confused, dazed. In the case of Marty, victim of hallucinations—he had died believing he spent three days on a prolonged drunk in the bar at Cripple Bend.

Solo struggled against the invisible bonds immobilizing him.

He stared, eyes wide, trying to find some clouding of that gas. There was nothing visible, but it was there.

If those two cowpunchers had ridden into this bank of nerve gas it had to be piped from some underground storage tanks. And these had to be somewhere nearby—a cave, a well, an abandoned shaft. Something! The answer was that simple, if only he could find it.

Sweating, Solo fought to push himself upward. If he uncovered the cave or shaft from which the gas emanated, he'd have taken a giant step toward answering the riddle of those missing cattle, perhaps a step toward finding those vanished trains and Illya Kuryakin.

He lay, sweating, and his mind raced, though his body was immobile.

Hallucination.

This was the answer. He saw clearly now how this nerve gas had made it possible to move one thousand head of cattle as if they vanished without leaving a trace. No traces would be seen by men who were brainwashed.

Those two cowpunchers had believed anything suggested to them, while they lay unconscious from the first effects of the gas. *Suggestion!* While they were unconscious, Marty had believed that he'd grown disgusted with tracking and spent three days drinking in Cripple Bend. Pete believed he had fallen from his horse and had lain unconscious.

This meant there was not only strong currents of nerve gas from storage tanks up here, there were men, hidden like vultures—not ghosts, or ghost riders, but men executing some plan of unspeakable evil.

Had those men been here while he lay unconscious? What suggestions had been planted in his mind—and Mabel's?

Would he be able to think clearly because he had taken a nerve gas antidote? Or would he see what some unseen men had suggested he would see once he could move and walk again?

He pushed up to his knees, and then stopped, shaking his head incredulously.

At first, Solo was afraid to believe his eyes, fearful suddenly that he was experiencing visions as after effects of the nerve gas.

A ninety-foot slate wall in the face of the mountain near them moved slowly like a sliding panel.

Shaking his head, Solo remained on his knees, staring. The opening in the mountain was hangar-sized, and the lighted cavern beyond it was huge, shadowed—a place to swallow a thousand cattle easily.

His heart battered at this rib cage. Whether he lived to tell it or not, he'd solved the riddle of how those cattle had vanished and why the searchers found no traces left behind them.

A dozen men rushed through the opening in the side of the mountain.

They took a few steps, then slowed, paused, stopped for an instant.

Watching them, Solo wondered if they'd banged into the invisible wall of gas.

They inched forward, and he saw they were almost bat blind in the natural light of the outside world!

They chattered at each other. Solo could not understand what they said, only that they seemed to be encouraging their fellows to move forward in this strange environment.

Unsure whether they were real or hallucination, Solo watched them move toward him.

All wore identical dun colored coveralls, tightly zipped to their throats. Their heads and faces were encased in plastic masks, transparent and worn over heavy rimmed glasses and inhalers covering their noses and mouths. Narrow slits across their lenses kept out as much painful surface glare as possible.

Still they were almost blinded in the lowering darkness of the mountainside.

They faltered painfully forward, almost like men on tightropes, feeling their way.

They surrounded Solo and Mabel on the rock shelf.

One of the men said, "Drag those horses inside the cavern—we're to leave no traces of these people."

A group of the men turned their attention to the horses, and the animals were carted on small wheeled flat cars through the doors.

Solo was lifted, placed on a canvas stretcher. He lay still, keeping his eyes barely opened as he was borne across the lava beds toward the cavern.

He saw that two of the men bore Mabel on a litter beside his.

Eyes almost closed, Solo stared at Mabel's face. She appeared to be unconscious. She had not moved since she'd fallen from her horse. He watched her, puzzled.

When they had been moved inside the cavern, the slate walls were closed, sliding back into place.

At a double-timed pace, once they were inside the artificially lighted cavern, the men carried the two litters to an elevator set in an inner wall. This lift was huge, large enough to handle trucks, train cars, even transport planes.

Solo scowled, understanding suddenly how a great many unexplained disappearances—of people, planes, material—had been accomplished over the past years.

Winches, cables, ratchets wailed, protesting, as the lift was activated, plummeting breathtakingly downward toward the core of the earth.

Lying on the litter, Solo tried to reckon the depth of the descent, but it was impossible. One mile? Two? Three? He could not say.

The rounded, dun-clad men removed their masks, stood at attention. Solo realized they stared at him and he lay still, seeing that they might kill him if they found that he was conscious.

Just when Solo decided the elevator would never stop its plunging toward the center of the earth, it slammed to a soul-shaking stop.

One of the men shouted, "All right. Quickly. Get them out of here!"

"To the chamber of zombies?" one of the men at the litters asked.

"Of course," the group leader answered. "Where else? The master will send for them if he wants to see them."

The elevator doors parted, sliding back smoothly. Solo was impressed by the smooth operation, and he wondered if there was perhaps some more sophisticated power than electricity generated above ground?

The litter men took up the two stretchers, running in that odd, double-time gait.

In stunned amazement, Solo saw they'd emerged into a huge underground metropolis, miles below the earth's surface!

The sprawling city's main arteries, Solo saw, were not paved streets, but instead were gleaming rails of tracks, laced out in every direction. Trains thundered along them, coming and going through a labyrinth of hundred-foot tunnels, larger than anything Solo had encountered in the world famed caverns he'd visited.

There were no buildings as such along these caverns, and milk-white fluorescent tubings stretched throughout the length of every tunnel.

Caves had been gouged as houses in the tunnel walls, and each of these were constantly illumined by these lighting tubes in unbroken links.

A door in a stone wall slid open. The litter bearers carried the two stretchers inside the chamber the size of Grand Central Station, and like it, built on many levels.

The huge central room where Mabel and Solo were placed on their litters was crowded with humanity.

The men set the litters down, went out of the door, which closed silently.

Solo sat up, looked around in this chamber continuously illumined by the tubing of lights.

Hundreds of people crouched on the stone flooring. There were more of them on the several levels that opened out above this main floor. These people neither moved nor spoke.

Gradually Solo became aware of a steady buzzing sound. It seemed to have begun when he entered the chamber of zombies, and it neither grew louder nor diminished.

He could not find the cause of the sound, or its source.

He saw that these people were, like Mabel and him, recent underworld arrivals. Were these human beings part of those thousands who had vanished from home, jobs, friends—without a trace?

The incessant buzzing continued.

Solo glanced at Mabel. She appeared to be sleeping deeply. She remained unmoving.

The buzzing increased, tormenting him. He stood up and looked around. No one else seemed aware of this steady clatter. He moved slowly, trying to locate the source of the sound.

No matter where he walked in the huge chamber, the sound remained constant, unchanging.

He stopped, suddenly realizing what the sound was, where it was coming from.

He shoved his hand into his jacket pocket, brought out a small pen-sized receiver. The bleeps were louder now, they came from his signal receiver—a wave-length set up to pick out the bleeps sent from a lapel-set worn by Illya Kuryakin!

Solo broke into a smile. Illya was somewhere inside this chamber of zombies! He'd found Illya!

He turned all the way around searching for Illya among the unmoving humanity.

He turned the receiver slowly until the volume of bleeps increased, giving him direction. He ran through the aisles of immobile human beings.

He saw a stout, graying man sprawled on a couch, and he paused, recognizing the billionaire philanthropist, Harrison Howell. He'd seen that face often enough recently on identification screens at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

He gazed at the staring man a second, but did not stop. It was enough for the moment that he'd located Howell.

He found Illya crouched, vacant-eyed, against a wall.

Solo said, "Illya?"

Kuryakin remained unmoving, staring straight ahead.

Solo knelt before Illya.

From a small leather kit, Solo removed a syringe, yellow with nerve-gas antidote, and needle. He unbuttoned Illya's shirt, pushed it off his shoulder.

He plunged the needle into the soft flesh of Illya's upper arm.

Illya cried out, protesting. "That hurt!"

Illya stirred, pushing away from Solo and shrugging his shirt back into place.

Solo grinned, watching color return to Illya's cheeks.

"Illya," he said. "It's me, Solo. Can you hear me?"

Illya made an impatient gesture. "Why shouldn't I hear you? I see you. You're right in front of me. What's the matter with you anyhow, Napoleon?"

Suddenly Illya stopped talking as memory returned. He peered around them, his gaze touching at the slouched people in the huge, silent chamber.

Stunned, Illya shook his head. He looked ill. "How did we get in this place, Napoleon?"

Solo winced. He said, "Think, Illya. Try to clear your mind. Can't you remember?"

Illya scowled with the effort. But his eyes brightened and he nodded. "Yes, I remember now. The train. It went off the main line, Napoleon, to a spur-siding that led to an underground elevator. Unbelievable! Large enough to accommodate that huge streamliner. We plunged downward—I don't know how far. Then we stopped in this big, brilliantly lighted place. I think that's when the gas hit me. I remember trying to fight my way out, but I was helpless, paralyzed."

"Nerve gas," Solo said. "It's what they use on all their victims." He glanced about. "This place is probably under surveillance. For the time being, we better act like the rest of these people."

Illya shook his head.

"I've had enough of being a zombie," he said. "I've got a better idea. Let's get out of here."

Solo laughed suddenly, feeling better. He clapped Illya on the shoulder, nodding.

"I'll buy that, partner," he said.

Illya glanced around one more time, shuddering involuntarily.

"I've seen enough," he said. "Let's travel."

Solo nodded, leading the way between the rows of people crouched in staring silence.

"Here's a pretty big prize," he said across his shoulder to Illya. He paused beside the immobile philanthropist.

"Harrison Howell!" Illya said. "We better take him along."

Solo nodded, then bent closer, checked Howell's eyes, his pulse. "Better not try it. Not now. It's no good; he's under too deep, and I'm out of antidote."

Illya gazed into the unseeing eyes of the billionaire. "Sorry, fellow." He jerked his gaze up. "How do we get out of here? This is as depressing as a visit to my relatives."

Solo grinned. "Right. I've seen more animation at chess tourneys." He gestured across the wide cavern. "They brought me in through that door over there. Let's see if we can open it."

He ran ahead of Illya to the litter on which he'd been borne into this chamber. He drew up, frowning. Both litters were empty. Mabel Finnish was gone.

"What's wrong, Napoleon?" Illya said. "Lost something?"

Solo exhaled. "I hope so."

They drew up, staring helplessly at the single door in the chamber wall—it appeared to be solid rock in solid rock.

"Must be a button or lever somewhere," Solo said.

Illya was already running his hands along the door edges, the framing. He shook his head. "Nothing on our side, I'm afraid."

"But they did open this door from inside when they left me in here. Maybe a foot lever."

Illya stared about the stone floor, the rock wall. He shook his head. "I see nothing." He struck the door with the side of his fist in frustration.

Almost magically the door glided open. Illya's mouth parted in astonishment, but then closed again when he saw the three stout, dun-clad men and the guns in their arms.

Illya sighed, glance at Solo. "I wanted out, but this wasn't exactly the escape plan I had in mind."

FIVE

The armed men prodded Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo ahead of them along the narrow walkways that paralleled all the gleaming tracks through the labyrinth of tunnels.

Trains raced past, crowded with men and material. There was a furious sense of activity everywhere in the brilliantly illumined caverns.

One of the guards jabbed a gun into Illya's back. Illya and Solo paused. The guard did not speak but jerked his head along a smaller, white-tiled corridor.

The atmosphere cooled in this seemingly endless corridor. It was quieter; there was none of the fevered activity of the tunnels.

Finally, they reached a bright green door before which stood two green-clad guards.

The green door slid into the stone wall; the guards stepped back, standing at attention. The dun-clad soldiers ordered Solo and Illya through the door, but did not follow.

The green door closed behind them and they were alone in a green-hued grotto. They saw that this place, like all other chambers, tunnels, caverns and corridors, was lighted by the endless fluorescent tubing, but the softer hue came from the green walls.

Across the far wall was three-foot thick, green tinted glass. Without speaking, Solo and Illya walked toward it. Strong light filtered through the glass from beyond.

They paused, seeing that beyond the glass wall, a rushing river swirled, alive with odd mud-colored fish and marine life.

"Blind," Illya whispered. "They don't even have eyes. We must be miles below ground—"

"Interested in marine life, gentlemen?"

A subdued voice spoke from behind them. They wheeled around in time to see a ten-foot door in a third wall closing. For an instant they glimpsed suites of incomparable luxury, all done in restful hues of pale blue, violet, tan.

Then the doors closed and they concentrated upon their host, a most remarkable looking man.

He was unforgettable.

One saw first that he'd been many years underground, and that the life had altered him, almost faster than he could force himself to adapt.

Clearly, he was almost blind. His eyes appeared monstrous, magnified behind thick lenses in black-rimmed frames. He'd been a big man, but he seemed to have slumped inward and his body had become pear-shaped. His legs were round like watermelons and he moved languidly.

Any movement appeared to exert him beyond endurance, and he breathed loudly with every step, gasping for breath. He wore green coveralls, zippered tightly, and sheep-lined slippers upon feet far too small for his round form.

When he spoke it was with this same gasping effort, a few words, then a fight for breath. But he help himself as erect as possible. Clearly he was a man of consequence, and knew it.

"You must be our leader," Illya said.

The huge man rolled forward slowly, agonizingly, peering at them through near-sighted eyes which gave him the look of a mole.

"I am the master here," he said, voice rasping.

"We're flattered, I'm sure," Solo said. "But to what do we owe your august attention?"

The round man paused a few feet from them. He drew a deep breath, spoke slowly, gaspingly: "You were watched on television, gentlemen, in the chamber—and unless you get ideas which must prove fatal to you, you are being watched at this moment by my men.

"It never occurred to us we weren't," Solo said, bowing slightly.

"You should have thought of this when you were in the chambers, Mr. Solo. We take the people from that chamber, Mr. Solo, and we make good citizens of them, in our own good time. We—would have done as much for you—and Mr. Kuryakin—if we had not monitored your attempt to escape."

"And now you're angry at us," Illya said in irony.

The stout man nodded, gasping as he spoke: "We have learned who you are. I am afraid this means you must die… Too bad, too. When I first glimpsed you, I had hopes of including such fine young men as you are—in my plans for the brilliant new existence I envision for the world."

ACT III: INCIDENT OF THE PREHISTORIC RIVERS

"Oh?" Illya said. "Sort of your own version of the Great Society?"

"A greater society," said the gasping voice, a note of pride vibrating it.

"I can't be very impressed by what I've seen," Solo said, needling the rotund man.

The round head nodded. "Perhaps this is because you have not seen enough. Isn't a little knowledge always a dangerous thing, Mr. Solo?"

"Maybe," Solo said. "But I don't think you're doing people any favors by turning them into half-blind moles, like the ones I've seen, or the zombies in that chamber over there."

The man waved a stout arm languidly. "Temporary, Mr. Solo. I assure you, it's all only temporary."

"I'm sure of that."

"I detect your sarcasm, sir. But if you could have been allowed to stay here awhile, you would have been impressed—despite yourself."

The rotund man held his breath a moment, then waved his arm toward the lighting tubes. "Look at our lights! We've lighted the core of the earth! Continuous tubing atom-generated power. Have the bungling scientists on the earth's surface accomplished any such miracle? No. But the scientists I brought here were able to do it, because I set them to that one task until it was completed."

Illya stared at him. "Do you really think men will lead better lives in a world like this?"

"Ah, no. We shall return to the earth's surface when we are ready—soon now."

Solo stared at the green-clad mole-round man. Like every power-mad being, he was an egomaniac—whether this was cause or result, Solo had never been able to determine. But it had been true since time began, from Alexander, through Attila, Hitler and every mad creature lusting to control his fellow beings and enslave them.

"Ready to take over, are you?" he said.

The stout man smiled. "At last. We have made alliances with surface-forces—we are ready to strike and nothing can stop us."

"THRUSH, no doubt, is your upperworld alliance?" Solo suggested.

The green-clad shoulders lifted slightly. "I don't mind admitting to you that THRUSH has aims sympathetic and parallel to our own."

Illya bust out, "Who are you, that you'd believe an international conspiracy like THRUSH could mean well for anyone except themselves?"

The round face pulled into a smile. "Perhaps THRUSH stands to lose—when other powers on the earth's surface lose. THRUSH has been most cooperative. I'm sure they will continue to be, until we no longer have any use for them."

Solo laughed suddenly. "Wonderful. It should be great when the jackals turn on each other."

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Mr. Solo. There will be no jackals—to quote your estimate of THRUSH—remaining above ground. That day will come soon. Don't you understand? I have atomic power down here. For every peaceful use—look at the huge stone doors in solid rock walls that glide open with the ease unheard of before.

"Look at our lighting. All atomic-powered. And I have atomic warheads. They are ready for use. No, Mr. Solo, when we strike at the earth-surface cities, only those beings lucky enough to be down here with us will survive. And when the earth's crust is safe for human inhabitance again, we shall rise up there—with the magnificent kind of society the earth should have!"

Solo whispered it. "So you've been choosing your people carefully—people you mean to save for your new existence? People like Harrison Howell?"

"Him among others. A man like Howell will mean a great deal in the new order. And so will the others we have chosen. I must say we have acted cleverly. Some were reported dead—by heart attack, by drowning, by lost planes, accident, lost at sea. We wanted them; we brought them down here, one way or another."

"Who are you?" Illya said again, gazing at the gasping man.

"Haven't you guessed?" the man inquired, breathing heavily. "Who else could have found this world, made it ready?"

"I've guessed," Solo said. "But I can't believe it."

"Ah, you know me, then, Mr. Solo?"

"Leonard Finnish," Solo said, shaking his head. "The UCLA geology professor. But you're not the sort of man the world has been mourning for the past five years."

The doughy, gray face flushed. "Those people! What do they know? They laughed at me five years ago, ten years ago, fifteen years ago. Another foolish professor, too stupid to come in out of the rain! Well, we shall see now if I was right. I tried to tell them about the world inside the belly of the earth. They wouldn't listen! They laughed!"

Solo sighed. "They should have listened."

Leonard Finnish laughed. He sucked in agonizing breaths. "Yes, Mr. Solo, they should have listened. Oh, they listened as long as I talked only the stupid, elementary geology facts they wanted to hear—the inner crusts of the earth. They were so please when I proved to them the age of the very areas of the earth by the difference in those layers.

"But I was no longer interested in the Basement Complex and its relatively short span of a half-billion years in the making, or the deposits of the Paleozoic Era. There was no long any excitement in fumbling around Triassic, Jurassic or Cretaceous formations. I knew as long as fifteen years ago that there was an inner world undreamed of by your less imaginative geologists."

"And so you set out to find it," Illya said. "Only—I remember now. You were lost in a geologist expedition, five years ago, in Death Valley."

The face pulling in a doughy smile. "Ah, yes. Death Valley. The key. This was the key! Far below the surface of Death Valley, I found what I have been seeking—one of those incredible, prehistoric river beds, long dry, forgotten for eons, but linked with other huge chasms. I had to follow it. And that's why I disappeared. That's why I am here now, finally, with secrets of the inner earth that will make me master of the world."

"You proved all your theories, Professor?" Solo prodded.

Exhausted from the exertion of talking, the stout man settled into a reclining leather chair, and lay for some moments, breathing from small oxygen flasks.

"We are many billions of years inside the earth's crust, gentlemen. Difficult even for a body that's anxious to adapt, to learn to live in such an alien atmosphere… But to answer your question, Mr. Solo. Yes, I proved all my theories beyond my most frantic dreams. Rib-like valleys and huge river beds, dwarfing anything known on the surface today; unbelievable subterranean freeways to every part of the western hemisphere.

"Perhaps a wall to blown away here, another there; but the links existed, I had only to find them, open them, and then lace them with railings—a few hours from Chicago to New Orleans, from San Francisco across to New York."

"And once you had them—there was only one use for those underground freeways—move fast and secretly, transporting anything you wished, including atomic destruction," Solo said.

Finnish smiled. "You simplify it, but that's the main idea. THRUSH was pleased to aid me in recruiting labor through Mexico, nuclear components through Canada, and the best scientific minds. At first we could take trains only car by car, an engine here, another there. But our atomic—powered elevators have made anything possible!"

Finnish swung out his leaden arm to an oblong table beside his chair. He took up one of the dozens of palm-sized rectangles that Illya and Solo now saw were placed on every table in the room—for instant use by a near sighted man.

Finnish pressed the button on the instrument.

At once a door slid open in a wall and a stout-bodied servant appeared there. He entered, bowing before Finnish.

Solo grinned: "Things were never like this at UCLA, eh, Professor?"

Finnish jerked his head up. He did not smile. "Some beings are mentally inferior, Mr. Solo, born to be servants." He spoke to the waiting hireling: "Serve drinks."

The man left the room, the door sliding open at a movement of Finnish's hand upon the small instrument in his palm. Moments later, the servant returned with decanter, glasses. He poured, served them to Finnish, Solo and Illya.

Finnish leaned forward in his leather chair, gesturing with his glass. "A toast, gentlemen. To my magnificent new society."

Solo shrugged, but drank. "If you're to have inferiors and masters, it looks like the same old rat race, with just different fat rats running things."

"Things will be run as they should be," Finnish said. "Too bad neither of you will live to see it."

Illya held his glass, but did not drink. "Mind saying how you hope to accomplish this take-over of world power?"

"Not at all. If your intellects fail to grasp the potential of underground freeways opening up this hemisphere to me, I'll be glad to explain. Your deaths have been set; you can no longer hope to interfere: Underground trains will carry our nuclear warheads—all traveling, unheard, undetected, deep inside the earth, at more than a hundred miles per hour.

"They will strike simultaneously from *beneath!* Chicago, New York, Washington. San Francisco. All blown to fragments at the same instant. Can your minds encompass the magnitude of this? The so-called free-world brought to its knees in one mighty operation!"

Illya stood as if considering this for some moments. He sipped at his drink, liked it, smiled vaguely and drank again.

Finnish peered at him near-sightedly. "My plan begins to appeal to you?"

Illya strode about the room, sipping glumly. "Not particularly."

"Then why have you decided to drink with me?"

Illya shrugged. "Oh. I decided I was thirsty. Besides, your plan is shot full of holes. I tell you frankly, Professor, it's not going to work."

Finish sat forward, gray face flushed. "Is that why you smile? You think I can be stopped now?"

"I think so," Illya continued prowling.

"Stand still and talk to me! I could have you killed at this moment!" Finnish cried.

Illya shrugged again. "This might bolster your ego, Professor, but it won't improve your plan. No. I see that as doomed, and you along with it. Unless you call it off now!"

Raging, the rotund man swung up from his chair, pressing the buttons of his signal-sender. The doors slid open and dun-clad soldiers double-timed into the room, armed. They came to attention, stood waiting.

Finnish hesitated, gasping for breath. Not taking his peering gaze from Illya's face, he said, "Now, if you hope for one extra moment alive—tell me why I shall fail."

Illya nodded. He set down his empty glass, then inserted his finger in it, wiped it around the bowl, licked it with delight. "A pleasure. You see, Professor, it occurs to me that the train I rode that night—even if communications failed, once it was within the rock-bound inner crust of the earth—still it sent bleeps out until that instant.

"Don't you see, Professor? They know exactly, precisely, the spot where my train left the earth's surface. They may be confused for a spell. But soon they'll discover the break. Once they do, it's a matter of time—time running out for you."

"Do you think we would have boldly taken two huge streamliners when nothing on earth could hope to stop us?"

"Sorry, Professor," Illya said, his tone saying he was not al all sorry. "It won't work that way. You could have hoped for success, only as long as no one above ground suspected from where you'd strike. They'll find the way down here now and they'll stop you, whether Solo and I live to see that or not."

"Get them out of here!" Professor Finnish's voice rose, cracking. He pressed the small signal sender again, frantically. "Throw these men in the dungeons until the warheads are ready to roll. We'll allow these noble meddlers to deliver at least two of the atomic warheads they're so certain will never be delivered!"

TWO

Solo prowled the dungeon into which the dun-clad guards had thrown him and Illya. This was a breathless cavity holed out of solid rock. He found the small round disc through which oxygen was pumped into the ten by ten foot cave. He pounded his fists against the door, finding this as solid as the walls.

He turned, glancing at Illya. "I'll say one thing. You talked us into a real hole this time."

Illya moved with puma-grace along the walls, tracing his hands along them, listening. He looked over his shoulder, grinned. "Disagree. Maybe what I've done has prolonged our lives. Finnish had us marked for instant death. Now he plans to let us ride prisoners on a couple of those atomic-warhead trains."

"A delightful development," Solo said.

"Maybe not. What's that old Hungarian proverb?"

"There's no place like home?"

"Almost. The one I had in mind goes, 'Where there's life, there's a way out.'"

Solo scowled at the small air opening in the wall. "I hope you find that way out quickly, Illya. They're flooding this place with that gas again. We're on our way to being zombies."

"How do you know?" Illya pressed against the wall, staring at him.

"They're doing it all right. That nerve gas is odorless, colorless, tasteless, but it's being pumped in here right now instead of oxygen. I'm getting that headache and eye-burn. That's the first warning And this time, old friend, we're fresh out of any antidote for it."

Illya straightened slightly. "Maybe one of these will help."

Solo's eyes widened with relief and wonder when Illya took one of the fountain-pen sized oxygen flasks from his jacket pocket. He extended it. "Just press the nozzle, as our friend the professor did."

Solo grinned incredulously as Illya produced another oxygen flask and fitted the nose cone against his own nostrils.

"Where'd you get these things?" Solo said.

Illya grinned. "Got dozens of them while I was at it. They looked like the handiest little gadgets we could collect in a place like this. They were all over Finnish's room. He had to have them were he could grab one quickly. Didn't you notice?"

"I noticed. But how did you get away with them? It's a wonder you didn't get us killed on the spot."

Illya smiled. "I figured the odds on our escaping weren't too good anyhow. And there's one good thing about being in a room with a half-blind man—he's not continually watching every move you make."

Solo exhaled. "But he warned you that he had closed circuit television cameras fixed on you."

Illya shrugged. "More half-blind men. That's what I told myself."

"And you took them, knowing they were watching you?"

"I figured I'd let my nearsighted friends learn the hard way that other old Hungarian proverb—the hand is quicker than the eye. They watched me

drink, sip, lick my fingers, wave one hand. They should have been watching both my hands."

Solo grinned at him, continued using the pressure-flask. There was not much hope in his smile. He moved along the walls, seeking a weakness, a break. He found none and the flat tone of his voice betrayed his frustration.

"I don't care much about dying, for a cause like Finnish's. Still, to do anything to stop him we've got to do more than stay alive on oxygen flasks. We've got to get out of here." He shook his head ruefully. "Too bad you didn't pick up some of those magic door openers while you were shoplifting."

Illya reached into his other jacket pocket and held up one of the palm-sized rectangles. "You mean this? Opens any door in the city. Have one; have two. They're small."

* * *

Illya and Solo kept close to the shadowed walls, running.

They slowed as they neared the end of the corridor. Beyond, where the corridor opened into the huge tunnel with walks and tracks and working people, there were fevered sounds of activity.

Solo and Illya moved cautiously near the end of the corridor. The workers were loading beef on train cars, unloading other gear, working in silence, panting for breath, making every motion in languid heaviness.

Along the silver rails of the tracks armed guards plodded in heavy tread, carrying their weapons loosely at their sides.

Solo and Illya remained motionless for some moments, watching the workers and guards. All were in dun-colored coveralls, the standard uniform for workers and guards in the tunnels.

Solo whispered across his shoulder to Illya. "We can bet our lives there are TV monitors fixed on all these lighted tunnels."

"Big brother watching his happy subjects at work and play," Illya said.

Solo nodded. "They're going to have a greater society, whether it kills them or not. But we've gone as far as we can go like this. We got one break—obviously there was no TV camera in the dungeon, or in the corridor. But we can't move around out there, unless we're dressed like the natives."

Illya nodded. "Right. Once they gander us on their monitors we're marked pigeons. Even the blind men will recognize us in these clothes."

"Clear enough why they dress everybody alike. It makes them easier to keep in line."

Illya said, "Could work against them, too."

Solo inched closer to the mouth of the corridor. Sighing, he whispered across his shoulder, "Will you be the decoy, or shall I?"

Illya drew a deep breath, set himself. "I make an elegant decoy—classic profile and all that stuff, you know."

He darted from the corridor, ran out into the tunnel almost to the place where the mole-round men were loading the cars.

Workers yelled, and the fat guards reacted. They moved in slow motion, but they did move. By the time the two nearest guards wheeled around and got their guns to their shoulders, Illya had already raced back into the corridor.

"Here they come!" he said to Solo as he passed.

The heavy treads came nearer, like elephants charging.

The first guard bounded into the corridor. He was only inches from the place where Solo was pressed against the tile wall. Solo let him pass, but reached out and deftly jerked off the guard's thick-lensed glasses.

The blinded guard cried out, a sound of guttural terror as he toppled past Solo. Solo smashed the glasses against the wall and turned back, waiting for the second armed guard.

This one lumbered into the corridor, gun raised against his fat chest. He tried to slow when he heard the cry of his fellow guard.

Solo drove his fist wrist deep into the fat stomach. The guard cried out, doubling forward. Solo judo-chopped him across the neck. The gun was flung into the corridor and the guard went sprawling after it. Solo snagged off the glasses, smashing them.

The he half-lifted the guard and tossed him beside his unconscious partner.

Illya wasted a moment blowing on his fist. Solo was already undressing and Illya followed suit. Solo unzipped the coveralls, worked them off the porcine bodies. They donned the guards' suits, took up their guns.

Solo broke the lenses from the black-rimmed glasses, gave one pair to Illya and set the other on his nose. They took up the rifles and moved along the corridor toward the tunnel.

Illya strode ahead of Solo, until Napoleon's voice lashed out after him. "You look wrong when you walk that fast; you look to restless to be a native."

At the very brink of the corridor, Illya slowed and grinned across his shoulder. "Right."

"Just remember that," Solo warned. "We walk like fat men, no matter what happens. We won't get anywhere down here by hurrying."

THREE

Carrying the weapons in the sluggish manner of the other guards, Solo and Illya sauntered along the walks past the loading train cars. Workers kept moving without glancing at them. Other guards leaned against the walls. None gave Solo and Illya more than brief, myopic glances.

Illya said, "Everything's going fine, but I feel like I'm carrying a target on my back."

"Just keep moving."

"They must have seen me on those monitoring screens."

"I've an idea we'll find out about that at any moment. They likely have their own ways of handling situations like this."

"You don't fill a guy's day with sunlight, do you?"

Solo was almost breathless. He longed to look over his shoulder, yet did not dare to. "It's just that I won't really relax until I get out of here."

By now they had moved in that lumbering pace to the head of the long train.

Solo slowed, touch Illya's sleeve. He nodded, indicating the cab of the engine. Two dun-clad men slouched at their places in the cab, the engineer and his assistant. The powerful engines, breathing, smoked, waiting a signal to roll.

Solo jerked his head upward. Illya nodded and moved ahead of him, swinging up into the cab.

The engineer and assistant turned in that leaden way. The engineer spoke coldly: "What do you want?"

"This train," Illya said. "Do you mind?"

The engineer squinted, peering more closely. He saw the slack dun-colored uniform, the lense-less glasses. The rotund man shuddered visibly, crying out: "You're not one of us!"

Illya nodded, smiling. "Nicest thing anybody's ever said to me."

Solo stepped close beside Illya, raising the gun, fixing his finger on its trigger. "I got the word for you. Never mind who we are. Get this train moving!"

"We're waiting for our orders!"

"You just got 'em," Illya said. He thrust the barrel of his gun into the engineer's fat belly. "Move it!"

The engineer nodded, turning slowly.

He engaged the gears. The train shivered, then inched forward. His voice rasped with contempt. "Where do you think you are going?"

Illya prodded him harder with the gun barrel. His voice was soft, "Miami's nice this time of year."

Solo watched the stout guards falter to attention, jerking up their guns as the train ground into motion. He spoke warningly over his shoulder. "The important thing for you, friend, is to get this train moving."

"I don't think there's any real misunderstanding. Is there?" Illya lifted the gun and let it bite into the engineer's flabby neck.

"No. None." All protest seeped from the engineer's voice. He and his assistant turned their attention to heading the train out.

Guards fired from the walks. They waddled forward, running as the train gathered speed. Bullets ricocheted off the metal of the cab. The two engine men crouched low, but kept working. The train moved faster.

As if reacting to delayed messages, workers in the train cars straightened, belatedly realizing the train was moving. They ran, leaping from the cars, striking the walls, or rolling along the walks like helpless bugs. Firing, the near-sighted guards stumbled over the fallen workers or collided with those still jumping from the faster rolling cars.

Solo fired his gun, aiming high, hoping only to keep the guards back until the train picked up momentum.

The engines struggled; the spinning wheels clicked on the railings. Corridors, cavern houses, white tubes of lights raced past.

Solo leaned out of the cab window, watching the loading yard and the guards receding in the distance. He stayed a moment as the train swayed on its braces.

Finally he turned, walked close to the engineer at the throttle.

Solo said, "I heard your trains can do a hundred miles an hour—"

"More!" The engineer straightened, showing his pride in this underworld rolling stock. "Much more!"

Solo grinned coldly at him. "All I want out of you then—is the very best this train can do."

Solo and Illya braced themselves in the swaying cab as the train moved with incredible speed, like a bullet through the white-glowing tunnels. The whole length of the monstrous train shivered. There were sudden turns in the runs, but the engineer did not slow.

Solo moved to the bulkhead of the cab, bracing himself. But Illya did not move. Strange fires burned intensely in the blue depths of his eyes. His wheat-colored hair fluttered on his forehead.

His mouth pulled across his lips. He shouted at the engineer: "Faster! Man, you can go faster than this!"

Solo stared at Illya, realizing that he didn't even really know this wild man who had been closer to him than any other.

"Move it, man!" Illya shouted at the engineer. "I told you, we're anxious to flake out of here."

The stout head turned on the fat shoulders. "Sure, I can give it more speed —"

"Then do it!"

"Do you think it matters? It doesn't matter how fast you run, how fast you force this train; you cannot escape the master."

Illya raged with laughter. "That old boy really has got you brainwashed, hasn't he?"

Stiffening, the engineer thrust the throttle forward. The train shuddered, seeming to lie on it side as it slid around a hairpin bend. "You'll see!" He concentrated on his instruments. "I'll tell you this—and we have learned it is true down here—no one escapes the master."

Illya laughed. "Your master says we can't escape." He pressed the snout of the gun into the thick jowls. "This gun says we'd better. Now who are you going to believe?"

Solo stared through the cab window as the fantastic underworld fled past the screaming train. Incredible formations whipped by, like nightmare fragments.

He spoke, awed: "Finnish didn't lie about one thing. There are whole valleys down here, three mile river beds. It's like a domed world."

"It's the master's world," the engineer said. "And the master controls it. As you will find."

The train whipped into a tunnel that seemed to press along the sleek exterior, and through it into a canyon of incredible depth and width. Underground towns loomed ahead, red lights flashing.

The engineer shouted, "Those warning signals! We've got to obey them."

"Negative." Illya said. "You keep moving."

People raced, like frantic animals on the walks, pressing close to the tracks. Guards knelt, guns at their shoulders, fixed on the train.

They fired as the streamliner wailed past.

The engineer spoke coldly across his shoulder. "It should not be long now. The word is flashing ahead to stop you."

Illya grinned at him wolfishly. "Just see that they don't."

"You don't understand," the engineer began.

"I know," Illya said. "It's like a broken record by now—"

"—no one can defy the master."

FOUR

With his three ministers waddling at his heels, Leonard Finnish plodded toward the control room. He held his signal-disc out before him, pressed it, and doors slid open before them.

The control room was frantic with activity, static with the tensions that seemed to rise from the television monitoring screens and from the automated control devices banked in the walls.

Silent men hunched on stools before the banks of flickering monitoring screens. Though they did not speak, their myopic eyes showed their sense of panic. Only the screen showing the stolen streamliner racing away from the center had any meaning at the moment.

Followed by his ministers, Finnish padded through the banks of control panels. He looked neither left nor right but went directly to the screen showing the stolen train.

"Racing at top speed, master," one of the monitors said to Finnish.

Finnish gave the man the briefest nod. He stared for some moments at the screen, the train whipping through tunnels, across wide valleys.

Watching the picture, Finnish pressed fat fingers against his throat, wheezing. A man thrust a small oxygen flask to him. Finnish took it, pressed its cone over his nostrils, never taking his gaze from that flashing picture.

He stared for a long time. It was as if he could see within the train cab itself where those arrogant young adventurers were in control, actually believing they could defy him, escape him—and live.

Finnish's pouting lips twisted. He sucked air deeply from the flask.

"What orders have you given?" he gasped.

"We've sent orders to all towns on that line to halt the train. But three cities now have failed to stop them, even to slow them."

Finnish sucked a deep breath from the oxygen cone. His voice was cold. "I'll take over now."

The monitor bowed, moving away from the screen and the microphones.

"Yes, Master."

Finnish draped himself painfully upon the monitoring stool. He peered some moments at the flashing screen, his face the gray of ashes. "I've not come this far to be stopped now. By anyone. No, not anyone!"

* * *

Lights flashed on the instrument panel before the engineer.

The stout assistant reached out toward the panel switches, but Illya leaped forward, snagged his wrist.

"What are you doing?"

"It is the signal from the control room," the engineer said. "We are being told to switch on our intercom receivers for a top priority message."

Illya released the assistant's wrist. "Ah? The master himself, eh?"

"That's right," the engineer said flatly.

The assistant flipped a switch on the instrument panel. The receivers crackled.

Leonard Finnish's wheezing voice suddenly filled the engine cab: "Mr. Solo? Mr. Kuryakin? Do you hear me?"

Illya glanced at the engineer. The fat man nodded. "Speak. The master will hear you."

"We're here," Illya said.

The speaker crackled a moment. "This is Leonard Finnish speaking, Solo. And you, Kuryakin. Listen carefully. I shall warn you but once. Stop my train instantly. Return to the yards."

The engineer's voice rattled with a pleased laugh.

Solo moved near the cab speaker. "Sorry, Professor. You must know we're not going to do that. We're on our way out of here."

Illya laughed. "That's right, Professor. I say that our agents probably have located your Indiana elevator shaft, your secret spur-line. But if they haven't they'll hear from us."

Finnish's voice wheezed through the crackling speaker. "You remain arrogant, eh? You're wasting time."

"Time's running out on you, Professor," Solo said. "Not us."

"That's where you're wrong again, Mr. Solo. For your own sake, I urge you to listen to me, and stop throwing away your last chance to stop that train

before I am forced to destroy it."

For a moment the engineer's sharp, cutting laughter was the only sound in the cab.

Illya stared at the engineer, he spoke to Finnish. "Afraid you're missing an urgent point, Professor. You may well destroy this train or this whole rail pattern in order to stop us. But it doesn't really matter, Professor, whether we die in your train or at the hands of your soldiers, does it?"

Finnish said, "But I know your idealistic souls too well, Mr. Kuryakin. You will face peril. But will you force others to die with you?"

Illya glanced at Solo. He said into the speaker, "Go on. I'm listening."

"There are many other people aboard that train at this moment. Innocent people caught aboard it when you stole it. Will you sacrifice them to a foolish attempt to escape, an attempt doomed to certain failure? Must these people die with you? That is your decision, gentlemen. Clearly, I will permit them to die—I can look only at the greater good. But will you doom them?"

Neither Illya nor Solo spoke. The train whipped through a tunnel so narrow that the white light tubing was only inches from the cab window, an endless glow worm wriggling eternally through this maze of caverns.

The speaker crackled. Finnish's voice deepened the tension inside the cab. "I must ask you to make your decision quickly. Your time is running out."

The engineer turned, his jaws sagging. "Listen to the master! Do as he tells you, before it is too late for all of us."

Finnish spoke. "The engineer gives you wise counsel."

Solo drew a deep breath. "Sorry, Professor. I can't make a decision. I think you're bluffing."

Finnish wheezed, gasping, the sounds magnified on the speaker: "You're a fool. That river you saw through the glass wall in my quarters should have warned you."

Solo drew a deep breath, remembering the raging waters, the blind marine life.

"I'm listening."

Finnish said, "That's it, Mr. Solo. I neglected to mention to you that we down here live in constant threat of underground rivers breaking through shallow crusts and flooding. We've had to equip every tunnel with many steel, watertight doors. We can slam these doors closed every few miles, in every tunnel, making watertight compartments. Now. In seconds, Mr. Solo, I am pressing a button on a control panel in this room that will close and magnetically seal, through the use of our atomic power, steel doors.

"The door immediately ahead of you will close. It will be like driving that train over a hundred miles an hour into a solid wall. Don't take my word. Ask the engineer there in the cab with you."

The engineer cried out in panic. "We'll slam into that steel wall, the whole train! Demolished!"

Finnish said, "Your engineer doesn't lie to you, Mr. Solo. And I do not bluff."

"Listen to him!" the engineer raged, trembling.

Finnish said, raspingly: "Your time is running out, Mr. Solo. I will no longer tolerate your interference."

Solo drew a deep breath. He glanced at Illya, but Kuryakin did not speak. His face showed nothing.

Solo lowered his gun. He nodded toward the engineer. "Stop it."

He waited but there was no sounds of triumph from the control room. There was no elation, no astonishment expressed. There had been but this one answer from the start.

"It was as I told you," the engineer said.

Illya gazed at the fat man, but did not speak. Solo stared through the cab window as the train slowed.

"The door!" The engineer whispered.

Holding his breath, Solo thrust his head out the cab window. Gleaming steel plates reflected the headlights of the engine.

He did not speak even when the train rolled to a stop only inches from the watertight wall of steel.

The engineer cut the engines to idle. The train gasped, sounding almost like the master himself.

Soldiers ran along the walks, dun-clad men with guns held at ready. They came up the steps. The engineer took the guns from Illya and Solo. Neither of them protested.

With smug smiles the soldiers surrounded them.

ACT IV: INCIDENT OF THE INCREDIBLE EARTHQUAKE

Professor Leonard Finnish remained crouched over the television monitoring screen in the control room, until the stolen streamliner had been returned to the loading yard.

He sighed heavily then and stood up.

A minister spoke at his shoulder. "Are the soldiers to slay the prisoners, Master?"

"No reason to permit them to live any longer, sire," another suggested.

Finnish lifted a pudgy hand, palm outward. "I want those men bound and alive, aboard two of the atomic warhead trains. My plans for them have not altered."

"They've caused you much grief, Master."

"That's right," Finnish wheezed, held out his hand for an oxygen flask which was instantly supplied him. He placed the cone against his nostrils, inhaled hungrily. "I want them alive when the atomic warheads explode. This will be a warning to any who might come after them, even from the ranks of the ambitious, or foolhearted, among our own people."

A minister exhaled heavily, "A wise decision, Master."

Finnish laughed flatly. "Wise or not, the point is, it *is* mine."

Lights flared red from every monitoring panel, from the walls.

Finnish straightened. He said, "Red alert. A message from our THRUSH contact!"

"It's here, Master!"

A monitor lifted his arm, waving it.

Finnish pressed the oxygen cone over his nostrils and waddled through the aisles of control machines to the instant-bulletin screen.

The screen flared brightly red. Finnish shoved the monitor aside, pressed a button. "Finnish speaking. What is the message?"

A woman's voice crackled in the room. "Top priority urgency. Red alert. THRUSH advised seconds ago that United Command agents on earth's surface have discovered your Indiana below-ground train elevator shaft, and the secret spur lines. Red alert. All plans to this moment must be altered to operation Four Strike. Repeat. Delay of even hours will jeopardize success of Operation Four Strike. Repeat. Red Alert. Repeat."

Finnish slapped the off-switch, silencing the speaker.

The bulletin screens continued to flicker brilliantly red.

Finnish leaned a moment against a machine, breathing deeply of the oxygen. Then he pressed control button panels on inter-com boards.

He spoke slowly, wheezing, but his voice was cold, without emotion: "Operation Four Strike now activated. Leonard Finnish speaking, activating Operation Four Strike. Load atomic warheads for immediate dispatch. Repeat. Load warheads for immediate dispatch."

TWO

The stone door slid open upon the sodden mass of human beings in the many-tiered chamber of zombies.

At gunpoint, Solo and Illya were thrust into the chamber. The door slid closed behind them.

Almost at once, Solo pressed his fingertips to his temples, the throbbing inside them immediately intolerable.

Illya pressed close to him, pushed one of the small oxygen flasks into his hand. "Use it secretly. Our half-blind friends are watching every move we make in here."

Solo nodded, but slumped heavily against a wall, burying his face against it. He breathed deeply through the flask nose cone.

After a moment, Solo felt the pressure of Illya's hand on his shoulder. "I've been thinking, Napoleon. Why didn't they just kill us? Why did they return us here? Why did they let us live?"

"I don't know. Except that means, Finnish is insane enough that he means to have his vengeance because we stole his precious train—"

"Exactly! And we almost escaped. He can't let his people believe such a thing can happen. Not that it's feasible, or worth attempting—"

"He means to use us as horrible examples. He means to have us die the most appalling way his mind can conceive—"

"Perhaps on the warhead train."

"Right. He gets rid of us and demonstrates to any dissenters in his ranks what can happen to them if they defy him."

"That's his plan, if we stand still for it."

"You don't really think we can get out of here again, do you?"

"I don't know. Maybe that depends on how big a diversionary action we can stir up."

Solo moved along the wall until he found one of the nerve gas valves. With material torn from a litter, he blocked it. He went running along the wall, looking for the next one.

Illya ran after him. He caught Solo's arm. "They're watching us on monitoring screens."

"Sure! That's it. They've got to kill us to stop us! If they shoot us in here, they lose us as horrible examples. That's up to them. Suppose we got enough oxygen into this place that the zombies woke up, or even came half awake?"

Illya laughed suddenly. "Oh, I'm with you."

"Then find these valves, block them."

Illya was already moving away from him, going along the walls. He located a head of an oxygen hose. He smashed the nozzle. Pure oxygen gushed past him through the broken valve.

By the time they'd blocked the nerve gas valves and smashed the nozzles on the oxygen pipes, some of the zombies nearest the oxygen lines were stirring, straightening, crying out.

"I hope their cameras are picking this up," Illya shouted.

Solo moved between the rows of waking people. He found Harrison Howell squatting like a Buddha.

Solo knelt before the philanthropist. He pressed the cone of the oxygen flask over Howell's nostrils.

Howell stirred, shaking himself. He straightened, gazing blankly at Solo.

Solo caught him by the arms, shaking him.

Howell tried to slap the oxygen flask from his face. Solo pressed it more tightly over his nostrils.

As Howell returned to consciousness, Solo spoke to him rapidly, giving him a quick picture of where he was, why he was here.

At last Howell shook himself, like a wet dog.

"I know now," he said. "I was on the train. It suddenly plunged down into the earth."

"A man named Finnish," Solo said, voice urgent. "He's gone mad. He means to attack the U.S. with four atomic warheads, unless we can stop him."

Howell nodded. "Leonard Finnish. Yes. I know that name. So that's why I'm here. I've read everything I could find that Finnish wrote before he disappeared. It made a pattern to me—insane, but there it was.

"Finnish believed a world existed in the core of the earth. I figured that he'd found that world. I was on that train, on my way to Death Valley. I believed I could find the way down here. I believed I could find Leonard Finnish. But I had no idea he was hatching a nightmare plot like this."

"Did you tell anyone your suspicions?"

"Sure. Told everybody who'd listen. Some who wouldn't. Word got down here to Finnish, all right. That's why I'm here. He had to stop me before I wrecked his plan."

"We've still got to stop him."

Howell nodded. "What can I do?"

"Plenty. We want to give Finnish and his fat madmen fits. As these people revive, get them stirred up; cause as much confusion as you can."

Howell stood up. "I understand. Leave it to me."

Illya came through the slowly waking crowds of people. He and Solo moved toward the stone door. "I've one of these door controls left," he said, holding the electronic device in his hand.

But they did not reach the door before it slid back into the wall.

The wailing of whistles, continuous and ear-splitting, washing into the chamber. Along the walks people ran, shouting. Trains idled in the yards; everything was a milling mass of activity.

Only one person seemed calm, controlled, self-contained. Mabel Finnish came through the door. Her face was chilled, her pace unhurried. She fixed a gun on Solo and Illya.

"Stay where you are, Mr. Solo," she said.

"Friend of yours, Napoleon?" Illya inquired.

"We've met," Solo said, watching Mabel's chilled face.

"My grandfather is to busy at the moment to bother about two such unimportant obstacles as you," Mabel said. "But I'm not. I mean to keep you checkmated until grandfather is ready for you."

"Well, I'm pleased you found your grandfather," Solo said in irony. Beyond Mabel, the frantic people rushed along the walks. Solo ignored the fevered activity as Mabel did, and his flat tone matched hers.

Mabel's mouth pulled bitterly. "I found my grandfather, Mr. Solo. Five years ago."

"I suspected you probably had," he said. "You weren't really worried about him, and you seemed to know where you were going better than I did."

She shrugged. "Why not? I've been traveling these routes for almost five years."

"Your grandfather's contact with THRUSH," Solo said it for her.

"Who better?" she asked.

Solo nodded. "Who indeed? I figure it had to be that way."

"You're not that clever, Mr. Solo."

"You wrong me. I am. Just that clever. I put nerve gas antidote in your coffee on that mountain trail, but you pretended to be knocked out by that gas, though it barely affected me at all. It was a little late, but I realized what your chore was at that ranch—to keep me, or anyone, from interfering before your grandfather got his deadly plan into operation."

"That's still my only objective, Mr. Solo."

"Only it won't work."

"If you move, I'll kill you," she said.

"With that gun?" Solo inquired.

Something flickered in her eyes. Then she straightened. "Test me, and see."

"Isn't that the gun you threatened me with in Wyoming?"

Scowling, Mabel nodded.

"You should have used it on me, then," Solo said. "I removed the lead from your cartridge because I was afraid to trust you, even then. And you know what? I still am?"

Mabel's voice rose slightly. "You're bluffing."

Solo glanced at Illya, nodded, then moved forward. Point blank, Mabel fired.

Solo kept walking. Illya followed him. Panic washed across Mabel's eyes. She fired again, pressing the trigger. The gun exploded but nothing happened.

Solo snagged her arm, removed the gun from her hand. Expertly he reloaded it with clips from her own jacket.

He pressed the gun into the small of her back.

"Let's go see grandpa," he told her.

The wailing whistles continued screaming through all the caverns. Guards ran ploddingly along the walks. Solo saw the four trains, idling, ready to move out in four directions.

But they did not go near them. With Mabel walking just ahead of them, they moved upward to the control room.

Two guards barred their way. Solo pressed the gun against Mabel's spine. She jerked her head at the guards and they went inside.

Leonard Finnish heeled around from a control panel when Solo spoke his name.

All the people in the control room came to attention, peering in desperate, near-sighted concentration at Illya, Solo and Finnish's granddaughter.

Finnish squinted, gazing at them, locating the gun in Solo's hand. He breathed deeply from an oxygen flask, then laid it aside, laughing.

He wheezed with laughter. "So you have broken free again, have you? Very commendable. But you are too late. Perhaps Mabel was unable to stop you, but it doesn't matter."

"I'm sorry, grandfather," Mabel whispered.

Finnish laughed again, in wheezing exultance. "It doesn't matter, my child. You have done well. You delayed our enemies just long enough!" He swung his arm toward a bank of monitoring screens. "Look at them! There they go! Racing on our own underground freeways! Four atomic-laden trains! Four trains on automatic pilot—four trains set to explode simultaneously. So you can see, Mr. Solo, you're late. Much too late!"

Stunned, Solo and Illya stood watching the atomic-loaded trains rush toward their targets.

Finnish peered at them, drinking deep satisfaction from their defeat. The he pressed a button. The guards rushed in from outside the control room.

"All right!" Finnish said, breathing painfully. "They've seen enough. Take them out into the city where all can see and kill them. Put their bodies through the hatches into the river."

The guards raised their guns, advancing.

Illya grabbed Mabel, arm about her waist, using her as a shield between himself and the armed guards.

He retreated, holding Mabel tightly against him. The guards ran forward, then paused, hesitant.

They stared at Finnish, uncertainly.

The huge man yelled at them, "Shoot!"

Still the guards hesitated, unable to believe they heard.

"Shoot!" Finnish raged, wheezing.

Illya backed between the panel boards, searching.

"Stop him! Shoot!" Finnish shouted.

Mabel screamed, shaking her head. "Grandfather! No!"

Finnish seemed not even to hear her. She no longer existed for him, except as a temporary obstacle.

"Shoot! Stop him! I don't care how! Stop him!"

The guards advanced, but still they hesitated. Gasping for breath, raging, Finnish lumbered toward the nearest guard, jerked the gun from his arms.

Finnish turned, quivering, holding the gun in his fat hands.

As Finnish fired, Solo lunged toward him, slapping the gun upward.

The gun exploded, the sound reverberating in the control room, the sensitive machine reacting, lights flaring.

Mabel sagged forward. Illya stared at her a moment, unable to believe the old man had shot her. He released her and she sank slowly to the floor. She did not move. She was dead.

Solo ripped the gun from Finnish's arms. The rotund man staggered forward, falling against a computer.

The guard whirled toward Illya, but Solo fired. The guard dropped the gun. He took a forward step, then fell as if he tripped over unseen rope.

He toppled against a machine, clutching at it as he slid down it to the floor.

Illya ran along the banks of panel controls until he found the one he sought.

Finnish stared at him, his eyes magnified behind their thick lenses. Gasping for breath, the rotund man could barely speak.

"Stop him!" he whispered.

He said it again, hopelessly, looking all around him, speaking to nobody in particular.

As if in trances, the other men stood unmoving, watching Finnish.

Illya ran his hand down the panel of watertight door controls. He slapped every button closing doors in every tunnel all through the maze of underground caverns.

Finnish cried out, pressing his hands to his throat waiting.

Illya grabbed up a stool then and smashed the control panel. Lights and fires flared through it. Illya kept smashing with the stool until the sparks no longer flew from the wrecked machine.

Finnish slumped against a computer, clinging to it. He stared at Illya, shaking his head. "Those doors. Now—they can never—be opened."

Illya turned, panting. His eyes were wild with excitement.

"Never be opened!" Finnish wheezed.

"That's the way it crumbles, grandpa!" Illya said.

Finnish shook his head, barely able to speak. "Four atomic bombs smashing into those steel plates! This whole region! Everything! Destroyed!"

Illya stared at Finnish a moment, then jerked his head toward Solo. "I suggest we get—out of here."

The green-clad men stood unmoving for one more moment, then as if all were released at once, they bolted for the doors.

Sobbing for breath, Finnish sagged against the computer, watching his underlings lumber clumsily, running for the exits.

"Fools," he gasped after them. "You fools! Where do you think you'll run to?"

Finnish looked around him. His gray face was rigid, his eyes bleak. His mouth parted widely and he gasped for breath. He slapped his hand around, seeking an oxygen flask but finding none within reach or sight.

He sank to his knees, sobbing. He sagged forward then, covering his head with his arms. He stayed there, rocking, crying, gasping for breath.

Illya ran across the empty room, a place of brightly lighted computers, busy panels, all clattering away in a suddenly, tragically doomed world.

Neither Solo nor Illya looked back. They raced along the white-tiled corridors toward the tunnels where the whistles screamed and people milled in panic.

"Solo!"

Howell yelled at them, standing in the atomic powered elevator. The huge lift was crowded with people from the chamber, and with many green-clad beings huddled together.

Solo and Illya raced across the cavern toward the elevator.

They leaped into it, going past Harrison Howell at the controls, fighting past the green zombies.

Howell pressed the up button and the atomic-powered lift erupted upward.

Solo and Illya, staring at each other, braced themselves against the first explosions that had to come from below, when the first of those trains plowed into those steel plates.

The elevator raced upward. They were conscious of barely breathing, of the increased tension as they awaited something that had to happen.

The elevator shuddered, striking its upper moorings. Solo yelled and people crowded past him, racing up the long incline toward lighted exits in the craggy, dark mountainsides.

An explosion rocked the earth. People fell, screaming. Illya was thrown against the cavern wall. He rebounded, shouting.

"Seismographs will go crazy tonight!" Illya yelled.

Another explosion shook the earth.

"Earthquakes they'll never believe," Illya shouted. He was knocked to his knees. He was aware of Solo, grabbing his arm, half-lifting him as they ran toward safety.

Another explosion rattled the foundation of the world. People screamed around them. Both Illya and Solo were slammed to the ground, and they clung to it as the elevator shaft slowly crumbled into itself.

They fought to their knees, running again, aware of the earth crumbling behind them.

"Another one coming!" Illya yelled. "This ought to rock your teeth!"

"Hang on," Solo shouted. He looked back over his shoulder, saw Illya at his heels, and he ran faster, going toward the sunlight above them.

THE END

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home
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